ADA 53 Final Prophecy

Fifty-Three
0-[I]-0 0-[I]-0
They were being followed.
Tahiri paused and wiped a damp wisp of yellow hair from her forehead, briefly passing over the three vertical scars that symbolized her connection with the Yuuzhan Vong. Her green eyes scanned through the many-legged gnarltrees as Shaeri stood guard at her back. Yet, their stalkers weren't yet showing themselves. With an effortless blink she embraced the Yuuzhan Vong aspects she had been given by the Shapers of Domain Kwaad and Yim and entered Vongsense.
At once the pulsating life of the planet around them dropped out, replace with an eerie silence. The gnarltrees faded out of existence, the mynocks and various wildlife disappearing from her Force perceptions. Dagobah, which was so strong in the Force, was completely invisible to her now, a muted shadow. Yet, a handful of bright clusters stood out. As imprecise as Vongsense was, compared to the Force, she knew now that there was more than a few Yuuzhan Vong out in the swamp around them.
More than a few, but less than a handful.
That puzzled her. At first she had feared that the Yuuzhan Vong had finally come to lay waste to Dagobah, to ruin it and twist it to their own liking. But with only five or six Yuuzhan Vong?
Were they chasing her and Shaeri specifically?
"What do you sense, Tahiri?" Shaeri whispered in Yuuzhan Vong, her own eyes darting through the darkness in an attempt to discern any threat. The two had been on their return trip after visiting the research facility located at the peak of Mount Yoda when they saw the Yuuzhan Vong scout craft descend into the swamp right by their Headhunter. Since then, the crew of the scout ship and Tahiri and Shaeri had taken turns being the hunter and the hunted.
"Yuuzhan Vong, a small group only," Tahiri replied in kind. "They're still several gnarltrees back. I think they sent some of their people back to the ship though. Their presence isn't as strong as it was before."
"If they're still on our tail, the must have a tracker with them," Shaeri concluded.
"Must have. We were letting the Force guide our path, it was completely random."
"They have a very good tracker," Shaeri amended.

"I think we've run enough. If we lay in wait, we can probably take them," Tahiri said, motioning to the upper boughs of the gnarltrees. "Then we can double back and steal their ship."
"But I like the *Night Eye*," Shaeri pouted.
"We'll have better luck outrunning whatever reinforcements they have in orbit in a Yuuzhan Vong scout ship than a slow and clunky Headhunter."
"We're definitely coming back here later for my fighter," Shaeri mock huffed.
Both she and Shaeri scampered up the cable-like roots, and secreted themselves in small hollows towards the top. Seconds passed. Tahiri kept tabs on the approaching Yuuzhan Vong with closed eyes. A heavy shadow cut through the low fog above them, large enough to blot out parts of the sky. She grimaced. That was no bird, or any life native to the planet for that matter. The Yuuzhan Vong flier was definitely going to make things difficult.
As the Yuuzhan Vong on the ground grew closer, their guttural mutterings slowly became coherent enough for Tahiri and Shaeri to hear.
"Are you certain they came this way?"
"They did. See? This impression in the moss shows the *Jeedai* rested here. The broken twig on this shrub here is from where her companion passed through in a hurry."
"She is *Jeedai*. Perhaps she left these signs to confuse us."
"Perhaps."
"But you think they are near?"
"Yes."
"And knows we are following them?"
"Yes."
"Then why do we not simply call out to them?"
"At some point we must, I suppose." As the figures moved closer, Tahiri could make out at least four different individuals. "Else they will think we wish them harm."
Tahiri's eyebrows rose at that statement. Glancing across at the adjacent gnarltree, she could tell that Shaeri was similarly surprised. Was this group part of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement?
"*Jeedai!"* One of the group called out. "I think you can hear us. We humbly request an audience."
Knowing that no warrior would ever use the word 'humbly' to address an enemy, Tahiri made to emerge from her location. Shaeri, however, shook her head sharply and motioned to herself. The message was clear, *I'll go first.* Tahiri scowled at the Freed One, who returned the

glare determinedly. Shaeri held up her own amphistaff, and then leaped down from her perch.
The four Yuuzhan Vong spun around and gasped in surprise.
"What business do you have with the Avatar of Yun-Shuno?" Shaeri said fiercely, her amphistaff coiled and ready should they try to attack her.
"Who are…?"
"We request an audience with her regarding a matter of great importance," the leader of the group cut his subordinate off.
"Speak that matter now, she will listen," Shaeri said mildly.
"If we could speak to her face to…"
"*If* I determine you are worthy, only then will you see her. You have tracked us to this planet, through these swamps, but your purpose has yet to be seen. Two of you are Shamed, but you and the other are warrior caste, all of Domain Jamaane if I am reading your markings right. Speak your piece, but be warned that I will not tolerate treachery."
"Very well, then. We have come here…"
Suddenly the Yuuzhan Vong flier, the tsik vai, passed overhead once more. Cables flung out from either side of it and warriors began to sleet down through the thicket of branches and vines. A cry went up from the four Yuuzhan Vong, even as Shaeri straightened her amphistaff and hurled it into the air. The weapon hit with dead accuracy, bursting through the face of one of the repelling warriors and out the back of his skull. Yanking the rope she had attached to her amphistaff, Shaeri recalled her weapon and whirled it into a defensive position.
The Yuuzhan Vong scout craft that had carried the delegation that had been chasing them suddenly rose up and opened fire on the flier. Eight other warriors managed to escape the doomed tsik vai, but the rest were instantly vaporized from the volley of plasma.
Tahiri ended her concealment and burst out of the overgrowth with a Yuuzhan Vong battle cry, her blue saber sweeping and lopping off the heads of two of the surviving warriors. Shaeri parried an attack and one of the crew from the scout craft bashed her attacker on the head with a makeshift club. The two Jamaane warriors Shaeri had identified were locked in their own battles, while the Shamed Ones with them had both moved to form a shield in front of a startled Tahiri.
The scout craft dropped lower and the ramp opened up. Two more Yuuzhan Vong quickly began waving at the group.
"Come! Hurry! More of Shimrra's people are on the way!"
"Go!" Tahiri urged her two shields.

"You first, Great One. We have sworn to defend you to our last breaths!"
"As an avatar to your goddess, I'm ordering you to get your butts onto that ship!" Tahiri yelled at the two Shamed Ones who were probably twice her age, her lightsaber knocking down a volley of thud bugs. One of the thud-bug throwers was dropped by Shaeri, who nodded to the two Shamed Ones. "Go, I'll defend her."
Both Shamed Ones scampered up the ramp. In the distance, more fliers were swooping in.
"Tahiri, go," Shaeri hissed. Several more fliers were already inbound, each of them escorted by a flight of coralskippers.
It was a fighting retreat as Tahiri, Shaeri, and the two Jamaane warriors hastily clambered onboard the scout craft. Once the ramp closed, the ship lurched and shot off into the sky. It performed a dizzying array of spins as it blew past the frigate in orbit, and outran a squadron of coralskippers before escaping into hyperspace.
Once safely away from the planet, one of the warriors moved to address Tahiri, but found Shaeri's amphistaff pointed at him.
"Shaeri," Tahiri placed a calming hand on her protector's shoulder.
"Tahiri, Domain Jamaane is one of the few domains where *none* of their non-Shamed have defected," Shaeri hissed. "They enjoy the benefits that come with being Shimrra's kin, so they have the most to lose should we win."
"We mean the avatar of Yun-Shuno no harm," the lead warrior said carefully, holding his arms out to indicate his peaceful intentions. "We were dispatched by the Prophet to seek her out."
"The 'Prophet'?" Tahiri blinked.
The warrior nodded. "He is the voice between the Yuuzhan Vong and the Yun'o. He can tell the future and has predicted several changes that had yet to occur. He bade us to seek you out for a matter of great urgency. If, after listening to us, you decide not to help, we will of course let you go free. But the hope and lives of many rely on your answer."
"Speak then," Tahiri said carefully. "I want to know why you followed me here."
"We did not follow you," the warrior shook his head. "I am Garagh Jamaane, former commander of the guards at Shimrra's palace."
"Former commander?"
"Your servant is correct when she says that no warrior, priest, shaper, or Intendant, of Domain Jamaane has joined the Freed movement."

"Shaeri is my friend, not servant," Tahiri corrected, knowing that Shaeri's Shamed One status diminished her standing in front of such a formerly-prominent warrior.
"My apologies, Avatar of Yun-Shuno. But she is still correct. Myself and my crew belong to a different order, another group who operates outside of Shimrra's command structure. I joined an underground movement on Yuuzhan'tar led by the Prophet, and through much difficult eventually rose to become his bodyguard. For it was the Prophet's people who saved my life and gave me a new purpose; who opened my eyes to the truth. Though myself and my crew had orders to seek you out, our primary objective was to locate a world you call Zonama Sekot. The world from his prophecies. We came to this planet believing that we had found that world, but located your ship instead."
"The world we came from is called Dagobah," Tahiri said. "The planet you seek is on the other side of the galaxy."
"So you *do* know where Zonama is?"
"Tell me more about this Prophet," Tahiri said, puzzled having never heard about this person before. "What domain?"
"He claims to be a little bit of all domains, One-Who-Was-Shaped."
"Just call me Tahiri," Tahiri said curtly. "And his name, background?"
"You can talk to him when you meet him. Now that we have found you, we have orders to take you to him. Only if you are willing, of course."
Tahiri cocked her head. "May I contact my family to let them know where I'm going?"
"You will come with us to meet the Prophet?"
Tahiri glanced at Shaeri then nodded once. "I will."
"We have with us an oggzil that will enable you to communicate with whoever you desire," Garagh said. "Without it, communication will otherwise be impossible due to the mabugat kan."
"The what?"
"A creature Shaped by Domain Kwaad to disrupt your HoloNet. It is why communications amongst your people have been…difficult, as of late."
Tahiri nodded slowly. "Then I thank you for offering your oggzil. May I converse with my family in private?"
"Of course," the warrior handed her a portable villip with the oggzil attached, and then motioned to a nearby room.
While Shaeri stood guard outside the room, Tahiri stroked the villip. Hands moved using the memories that had been implanted into her mind, skillfully allowing the connection between the villip and the HoloNet receiver aboard the *Millennium Falcon* to form. It had been the

first connection she had thought of, but it was also probably for the best.
"Solo here."
"Captain," Tahiri smiled faintly even though the connection was voice-only.
"Tahiri?"
"Yeah."
"Tahiri!" This time it was Leia's voice. *"Thank the Force. We tracked a Yuuzhan Vong battle fleet to the Dagobah system. We weren't sure if you made it out in time."*
"Shaeri and I managed to escape shortly after they arrived. We're onboard a Yuuzhan Vong scout ship heading for Coruscant."
"Kid," Han drawled. *"I hope you aren't counting on another lucky break your whole life, because you've just used up whatever you may have had coming. What in blazes possessed you to get on a Vong scout ship and plot a course out of the frying pan and into the fire?"*
"I didn't have a choice," Tahiri said. "A lone Headhunter couldn't have outrun the coralskippers and frigate that was in orbit. Shaeri and I weren't going to get off Dagobah without the help of Garagh Jamaane and his crew."
"*Jamaane?"* Leia sounded more than worried now. *"Of the list of domains that have defected, they're not one of them. Are you two alright?"*
"Yeah," Tahiri said. "And don't worry about the crew. They're on our side, I think."
"You think?"
"And I kind of know what I'm doing," Tahiri said soothingly.
"Kind of?"
"I'm not really reassuring either of you, am I?" Tahiri laughed softly.
"*Not in the slightest."* Han drawled. "*First you run off to a planet that has always been trouble for our family, and now you're heading to a planet overrun with Yuuzhan Vong, which Jacen just barely escaped from. Can you please enlighten me as to how any of that is a <u>good</u> idea?*"
"I wouldn't say good," Tahiri said sheepishly. "It's more like I'm going because I feel it's the right thing to do. Garagh and this 'Prophet' he follows sound like they can be pretty good allies. And they're searching for Zonama too. They see it as some sign that the redemption of all Shamed Ones is at hand. If I can help us gain more allies, undermine Shimrra's grip even further, isn't that a good thing?"
There was a long pause, then Han responded, sounding very, very tired. "*If I could name the times I've heard that 'right thing to do' line...*

Tahiri, you're too young for this. You've already been through a lot, done your fair share in this war. Heck you helped start an entire government from the slave labor of a race of alien invaders. Can't you just...just take a rest? Come back to the Falcon and just relax, with nothing else to worry about. You've done your part, you don't have to do anything more."
Tahiri looked fondly at the villip. "I love you and Leia as well, Han. It's why I *have* to do this. To end this war and make sure the both of you are still around to celebrate the peace that follows. To make sure that you two, Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin are all still in one piece and able to enjoy the times that come afterwards."
"But Coruscant?"
"I'll make it back out alive, I promise," Tahiri breathed, closing her eyes and reaching across the stars to the weak bond she shared with Leia. She revealed to the mother of Anakin her own hopes and dreams, pleading Leia to understand. Leia sent back feelings of family, of warmth, of all the things Tahiri needed and thrived upon, letting the young blond teen know exactly where she fit in their family. "I want that peaceful future so badly, too. To just be with Anakin without any worries or fears. But that won't happen so long as this war is going on. The faster I end the war, the faster I can be with him. I know you're worried, and I appreciate it your care so much. But this is something Shaeri and I have to do."
Another period of silence ticked by. Finally, Leia spoke up. *"Please, be careful Tahiri. You're already a large part of this family. Like a second daughter to me and Han. A little sister to Jaina and Jacen. Anakin's best and closest friend. It would hurt all of us badly if anything more were to happen to you."*
"Thank you," Tahiri whispered softly.
"Do you at least have a backup plan if anything goes wrong?" Han said gruffly.
"Hey, I'm making this up as I go along. They don't call it Solo luck for nothing," Tahiri giggled.
"'They' don't know what they're talking about," Han grumbled. *"I've never needed luck. I've always relied on my own skill."*
"Uh huh."
"I have!"
"Yup, I was agreeing with you."
Han took a deep breath and exhaled. *"Listen you. You do whatever you have to do, but you do it and come back. Between you and Anakin, you've probably used up all of that Solo luck on your last few*

adventures. Just—just come back safe and remember to kill the other guys before they kill you."
"I will," Tahiri nodded. "Tahiri Kwaad out." She stroked the villip and it reverted with a soft sigh.
"Due to the low profile we have to keep, it'll be at least a week before we reach Coruscant," Shaeri reported from the door.
"I guess we should get some rest then," Tahiri breathed. "Because I have no idea what's in store for us once we get there."
0-[II]-0 0-[II]-0
The port shields of the Bakuran Defense Force flagship *Sentinel* collapsed and plasma punched through the hull like a fist through flimsiplast. The shockwave rippled through the ship and caused the lights to momentarily dim as hull plating buckled and wiring frayed. No sooner had the molten liquid projectile punched *into* the ship, then the vacuum of space sucked everything in the vicinity of the breach back out. Emergency doors slammed into place, cutting off the damaged portion of the vessel, and the *Sentinel,* a *Bakuran*-class destroyer, gave back as good as it took.
Standing at the helm of the ship, Valin Horn was slightly pale as the artificial gravity reasserted itself. His father and sister were on different ships in the fleet, using the battlemeld to ensure that no segment was overwhelmed. And Jedi Knight Lowbacca was commanding the Twin Suns squadron in Jaina's absence.
"Twelve degrees port, ten above the horizon!" General Grell Panib barked out.
As the *Sentinel* began to recover, four other Bakuran destroyers, all newly commissioned to mark Bakura's re-entry into the war, moved to cover her. Escorting these heavy ships was a literal cloud of *Swarm*-class battle droids supplied by their P'w'eck allies. The ships formed a new spearhead to counter the Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements; their P'w'eck created, ship-mounted beam cannons spearing out through the debris-filled space between their two fleets.
"Have our Vong allies and the Bothans move in to take out that new Dreadnaught and those coralskippers," Panib stabbed a finger at the ship that had just jumped in-system and punched a hole in their weak side. "And tell Vedo the Hutt to take his forces and keep those other frigates from swinging back around while we're distracted by our new guests."
"Yes, sir!"
The different fleet elements maneuvered as if they had been working together for years, and the Yuuzhan Vong defenders of Duro did their damnedest to repel these invaders. Everything was going well, until—

"Message from Vedo the Hutt."
"Put it on."
"Yes, sir."
A protocol droid's mechanic voice filled the bridge. *"The Great Vedo the Hutt calls to inform you that Duro Squadron wishes to break formation and have the honor of retaking their home planet."*
"Tell Duro Squadron that there won't be any final retaking of the planet unless these Vong reinforcements are neutralized," Panib said darkly.
"Vedo the Hutt has stressed this numerous times, but Commander Yurf Col is instant that his forces be allowed to break formation and began bombardment of Yuuzhan Vong structures on the planet at this very moment."
Panib muttered a Bakuran curse under his breath. "Jedi Horn? I'd appreciate any advice. If their group breaks formation, the Hutts will be the weak link in our chain. A concerted push by the Vong will cost us all the ground we've gained thus far."
Valin blinked once, but then nodded. "Can you put me through with Commander Col?"
"Of course." Panib signaled to his comm-operator, who acknowledged that the connection had been made.
Valin stepped forward. "Commander Col, this is Jedi Valin Horn aboard the *Sentinel.* Duro will be ours at the end of the battle. You *will* get your home-world back, I promise. I know you and your men are worried about those still on the planet, but you've waited this long for a chance to retake it. Only a few more hours, commander. That's all we need. Don't throw away your one chance at walking on your home-world again."
There was a long pause. Then the Duro commander replied shortly. *"A few hours, Jedi Horn. We're advancing after that whether you like it or not."*
"Thank you, Commander," Valin nodded to General Panib again. "Until that time, can you keep reinforcing the Hutt line? We need to take out the Dreadnaught and supporting vessels while your forces keep the original defenders busy."
"Understood. Commander Col, out."
"Thank you, Jedi Horn," General Panib breathed easier. He then looked to his other sensor operators. "Apart from the Dreadnaught and coralskippers, what else has joined the party?"
"Four frigate analogs, two cruiser analogs, sir."
"Then that's the last of the reinforcements, don't you think?"
"Yes, sir."

"Jedi Horn, feel free to signal your counterpart. General Antilles is free to begin his attack. Comms, tell the other Bakuran destroyers and Hutt interdictors to begin interdiction. Likewise, activate our new yammosk jammers. We'll be in a slugging match for quite a while."
As the other officers went about relaying the instructions, Valin closed his eyes and reached out through the Force.
0-[III]-0 0-[III]-0
Yaqueel Saav'etu, a just turned fourteen Bothan Jedi apprentice onboard the *Mon Mothma's* bridge, opened her eyes with a small gasp as she felt Valin's message through the Force. "General Antilles, we're a go."
"You heard the young lady," General Antilles said to the rest of the bridge crew. He flicked on the fleet-wide comm. "This is General Antilles. We have confirmation that the Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements from Fondor have been drawn away. Commence hyperspace jump and launch your attack on my mark."
It was quite possibly one of the oddest fleets Wedge had been in charge off since the outbreak of the war. In addition to the mishmash of Star Destroyers, Mon Calamari cruisers, and regular ships of his Galactic Alliance fleet, there were the Battle Dragons and *Nova*-class battle-cruisers of the Royal Hapan Navy, and a hodgepodge of vessels from the Smuggler's Alliance. The commander of the latter group, Wedge had no problems with. After all, despite being a bunch of smugglers, mercs, and people with too much time on their hands, they were being led by Captain Han Solo.
The leader of the Hapan force, however, was another story.
Dukat Aleson Gray was one of those recently-promoted-to-a-position-of-power-and-had-to-exercise-newfound-power type of people. He had an overinflated sense of self-worth and very little practical experience in the battlefield. Though Wedge knew that the Queen Mother had sent the Dukat out with him so the junior officer could learn from him, he privately thought that the Queen Mother had sent Aleson back to Fondor in hopes that she wouldn't have to see the Dukat ever again.
He heard Yaqeel stifle a giggle and shook himself from his thoughts, raising an eyebrow at the young teen.
"Sorry, you were thinking pretty loud," Yaqeel laughed. "Don't worry, I was wondering the same thing."
Wedge sighed and reached for his comlink again. Maybe he should consider Yaqeel practice for when Myri and Syal became teenagers. Although he doubted his daughters would ever be as furry.
Of course, he also had a fleet to run. He nodded to the young Bothan, relying on her to fill in for the role of their downed HoloNet. "Are you

certain the Bakurans and the others have engaged the reinforcements?"
Realizing it was time to be serious, Yaqeel closed her eyes and reached back out to Valin for confirmation. Out of their little group of friends, she had always been the best when it came to actually deciphering the emotional messages and thoughts sent through the Force. It was why she had been chosen to accompany General Antilles, and Valin had been sent with General Panib. Between all the operations going down across the galaxy, theirs was the one that needed the most coordination between fleets.
After a second, Yaqeel nodded. "They're fighting pretty hard at the moment. From the image Valin sent, I think some of Fondor's defenders have actually joined in the fighting. A second wave of ships arrived between my last report and now. From the numbers he flashed me, and from the latest reports on the defenses of Fondor, we should have a pretty big advantage now."
"Good job," Wedge smiled at the young teen. He glanced out the bridge of the Star Destroyer and saw the rest of the fleet waiting. "Fleet group jump to hyperspace and engage."
At once, the deadly taskforce leaped forward from their staging grounds. The blue tunnel of hyperspace died away a few minutes later, and they emerged over the Yuuzhan Vong-controlled shipyards of Fondor.
"The Royal House of Hapes hopes you Yuuzhan Vong have enjoyed your stay at Fondor and requests that you leave," Dukat Gray announced over an open channel to the Yuuzhan Vong invaders. "*Failure to comply will result in very lethal consequences for you."*
Wedge brought a hand to his face. *What was the Queen Mother thinking?*
"Yuuzhan Vong forces are scrambling to meet us."
"Squadrons of coralskippers inbound, their capital ships are forming up behind them."
"Numbers?"
"We outnumber them three to one in terms of capital ships. They have a greater advantage in terms of the number of fighters they can bring to bear. Scans relayed to us from the Smuggler's Alliance suggest they converted one of the moons into a fighter-production facility. Sensors are picking up well over two hundred fighters incoming."
Wedge nodded, the news was no surprise. Freed One agents within the Yuuzhan Vong garrison on Fondor had already reported as much. He opened the comm again. "All forces, stick to our initial plans. Fighters

you may engage. *Lancer*-class frigates and other anti-fighter units move into position."
The wave of Galactic Alliance fighters and their allies surged forward; A-wings, X-wings, B-wings, out of the Mon Calamari cruisers and Star Destroyers, countless squadrons of Miy'til-class fighters streamed out of the Hapan battlecruisers, and customized fighters and rare-builds ranging from TIE fighters to Hornet Interceptors and Morningstars screamed out from the Smuggler's Alliance. All at once, a series of comm-chatter filled the bridge.
"Wild Knightz haz the lead."
"They're all over the place!"
"Keep your head on straight Blue Seven!"
"Rogue Leader to all Rogues, form up, we'll engage those three frigates trying to enter the battle."
"Royal squadron can you take out those three squads coming in at seven-ten?"
"Will do Contraband squadron. Just keep those missiles off our backs."
The sensor operator looked up once more. "Enemy cruisers are beginning to withdraw."
Wedge allowed a smile to come to his face. "Interdict."
At once the gravity wells aboard the *Mon Mothma* activated, as did the ones on the *Memory of Ithor* and *Olovin*.
"Broadcast the offer to surrender," Wedge said calmly. Having worked side-by-side with the Freed Ones defending Kuat for the better part of a year, he had grown to respect the Yuuzhan Vong as a people. Though he doubted that very few of the ships would take him up on his offer to surrender, it was the least he could do for the thousands of Shamed and lower ranking warriors aboard those ships. "Remind them that their new Warmaster probably won't tolerate a failure to hold these shipyards."
"The enemy capital ships have plotted collision courses with our vessels."
Wedge closed his eyes tiredly. Blind fanaticism was something he would never understand no matter how many times he went up against it. "Activate yammosk jammers and engage the enemy capital ships. Tell the Hapans that the honor of taking Fondor will shortly be theirs."
0-[IV]-0 0-[IV]-0
The knowledge that Yaqeel and Valin's fleets had been successful in their initial engagements several days earlier, heartened Seff Hellin and the Galactic Alliance fleet he was attached to. "Jedi meld is ready, detecting no tremors in the Force."

"Very good, Jedi Hellin. You may inform your counterpart in the Imperial fleet that we too are starting our attack," Admiral Kre'fey said.
The *Ralroost* was at the point of an all-out attack made up of Galactic Alliance and Tion Hegemony forces and staring down the Yuuzhan Vong garrison in the Castell system. This would only be the first of many garrison forces they would face as they cleared out the Yuuzhan Vong in occupied systems along the Perlemian Trade Route en route to Coruscant itself.
In no time at all, the garrison was defeated, much of the ground forces surrendering as the taskforce's ground troopers moved in. A token defense force was left behind to help the native Gossam peoples begin the painstaking process of rebuilding their ravaged home-world, and the rest of the taskforce moved on.
Other systems fell in short order. The garrisons at Ifmix, Yabol Opa, and Delle, all surrendered or were destroyed as the forces under Admiral Kre'fey pushed forward. Once out of the Colonies region, however, opposition stiffened. The moment the combined Galactic Alliance-Tion Hegemony fleets emerged into the Ralltiir system, it was a different story.
Cruisers, Dreadnaughts, frigates, battleships, a full Yuuzhan Vong battle group awaited them, ready to protect the newly created Yuuzhan Vong colony located on the planet Ralltiir itself. The Yuuzhan Vong had enough of an advanced warning to form a significant defensive line.
Seff Hellin gazed at the large number of alien ships apprehensively. The Yuuzhan Vong were the ones who now had numerical superiority.
"Dovin basal mines are preventing a retreat, sir!"
"Enemy forces moving in, fighter squadrons are overwhelming the advance elements of our fleet."
Admiral Kre'fey, however, was hardly fazed. "We knew that the Yuuzhan Vong would toughen up sooner or later. Reform the lines. Have our fighters fall back to protect the engines and weapons of our capital ships. Assign enemy targets, two per capital ship. We've come this far and we're not backing down now."
"Admiral, Barefoot squadron is reporting grutchin! Thousands of them! We're losing fighters at a rapid rate." As if to emphasize the officer's report, the bridge crew saw an X-wing disintegrate into a fire ball directly in front of the bridge viewport. "Sapphire squadron's lost three fighters! Piper squadron's gone!"
"Electrifying our hull had no effect on the grutchin. We have hull breaches on decks seven, ten, and twelve. Security teams moving to take care of any infiltration."

The *Ralroost* shuddered violently as a barrage of plasma slammed into it from several different directions. Somehow Admiral Kre'fey remained upright. "Begin yammosk jamming. Hit them with everything we have. Continue to rotate the more damaged ships to the back of the line. Hold the line. We are going to *win* this fight. Jedi Hellin, if you have anything more to add to this fight. Now's the time."
"I have something in mind. I was working on it with Jedi Master Madurrin," Seff said quickly. "Give me a moment."
Seff sat down on the deck and let out a breath as he closed his eyes and began to concentrate on the allied vessels. Though it was beyond his abilities to affect the Yuuzhan Vong in any way, he could still give his own side a boost. Adapting the battlemeld for the non-Force sensitives in the ships around him, Seff began to raise their sagging morale in the face of the superior Yuuzhan Vong force. Rapidly cycling through the countless minds in the taskforce, he helped to tighten up their coordination, increase their resolve. He allowed them instant understanding of each other's tactics and battle plans. Fighters and capital ships began to work together in an eerie coordination as the captains and pilots shifted their positions in perfect synchronization. He could feel Madurrin aboard General Farlander's flagship, the *Mon Adapyne*, and Tekli, aboard the *Pride of Selonia*, send their approval and support. While Madurrin continued to coordinate the Jedi serving in Admiral Kre'fey's taskforce, Seff continued to enhance the natural abilities of their non-Jedi allies.
Though the casualties were still heavy, the Yuuzhan Vong defenders were gradually beginning to lose ground. The tide changed as the two Dreadnaughts that had formed the backbone of the defending fleet succumbed to the concentrated fire directed by both Seff and Madurrin. With the yammosk jammers still pounding away, the defender's discipline finally broke and their formations began to fall apart.
"That's it! Pound them! Take them down!" Admiral Kre'fey waved his fists energetically, miming a boxer punching out a training dummy. Their ship rocked and Kre'fey was finally thrown off his feet as a squadron of coralskipper dived into the Bothan Assault Cruiser's hull. Gouts of fire erupted out into space before the fuel was consumed and left burn out craters in their wake.
"Sorry, they got by me," Seff said, wiping a bead a sweat from his forehead. Who knew that continuously enhancing the natural abilities of thousands of people could be so draining? He received additional support from the battlemeld, reinforcing his own flagging strength, but he had already made the difference.

The Galactic Alliance taskforce was advancing on all angles, the Yuuzhan Vong forces in full retreat.
"Signal the rest of the fleet to hold here," Admiral Kre'fey said, getting up and dusting off his uniform. "We'll regroup and secure this sector. Jedi Hellin. Inform the others that we might not be able to make it all the way to Corulag."
0-[V]-0 0-[V]-0
The fourth front in the war was equally hot as missiles and lasers filled the vacuum of space. Days of feinting and maneuvering had come down to one last engagement with Bilbringi's defenders. The Imperial, Chiss, and Galactic Alliance forces wanted those shipyards back. The Yuuzhan Vong had control of the shipyards at Bilbringi and were not inclined to let them go any time soon.
"Dozen, Death Knights, we're going to need you to lead the next run on those super-cruisers by yourselves," Grand Admiral Pellaeon said gruffly even as the ship shook from a ship-to-ship broadside. The Yuuzhan Vong vessel came out of it worst off, and a squadron of fighters finished it off. "Our Defender squadrons were roughed up on that last attack and won't be able to join you."
"Roger, Admiral."
"General Garm Bel Iblis is reporting that a second Yuuzhan Vong fleet has just dropped out of hyperspace on his flank."
"Elements of the first Vong fleet are forming up and attempting to cut a path through our own."
Gilad Pellaeon, watching the battle from the bridge of the *Right to Rule*, rattled off another set of orders. "Bring the *Chimaera* and *Defiant* around to reinforce our lines to wherever those Yuuzhan Vong are headed. Bel Iblis can take care of himself."
Natua Wan silently took in the exchange as she communicated the orders to Bazel, who was on Garm Bel Iblis' flagship the Mon Calamari cruiser *Rebel's Pride.* The two were acting as pivot points, with their respective fleets swinging back and forth based on their instruction. One of the benefits of communicating through the Force was that there was no unnecessary comm-chatter in the background and you could inject unmistakable urgency or soothing calm into a request.
"Comm, contact the Chiss and have them dart behind that charging Yuuzhan Vong force, cut them off and surround them," Admiral Pellaeon barked.
A brilliant, nearby explosion temporarily filled the bridge was light.
"What was that?"
"The *Tyrant's Hand* just went down. Direct hit to the bridge and reactor areas," a sensor operator replied.

"Admiral," Natua spoke up after a brief conversation with Bazel. "General Garm Bel Iblis is going to try and draw the Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements towards us. He wants to try to catch them in the same trap you're setting up with that force that's charging us. He'll feign a retreat and then split his forces to engulf them half way. He's requesting we take the other half."

"That makes sense," Admiral Pellaeon motioned to the comm operator. "Relay the change of plans to the Chiss. We have to time this right or the Chiss will be the ones in the bind."

"I'll let Zekk know," Natua said promptly. Zekk was on the Chiss flagship alongside Major Irolia, acting as the Jedi intermediary between them and the other two fleet elements. The smallest of the three fleets, the Chiss were being used as a scalpel. Slicing through formations with pinpoint precision and sowing chaos in the ranks of the enemy by taking out command ships and squadron leaders. But despite their efforts, the battle was still too close to call.

"Initial defenders still regrouping. Their second fleet is keeping our forces busy."

"Chiss are ready to move on your signal, Admiral," Natua informed. "I've signaled Barv to begin entrapping his group."

The battle raged on, with the Yuuzhan Vong original defenders lancing into the Imperial Remnant fleet and ripping apart several Star Destroyers in the process. The rest of the Remnant fleet began to fall back, drawing the attackers in. At the same time, General Garm Bel Iblis' fleet began to merge with the right flank of the Imperial line, drawing the Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements into the first wave of attackers. The Galactic Alliance fleet split up and made a mad dash around the flanks of the spearheading Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements, able to outmaneuver the deadly force due to the element of surprise.

"Signal the Chiss," Pellaeon ordered.

As the Imperial Remnant and Galactic Alliance fleets formed a two-thirds fish bowl formation with their ships, the Chiss streamed in from the last escape route available. The space between the three fleets became a kill box as missiles, lasers, masers, ion bursts, and heavy rockets pounded the entrapped Yuuzhan Vong forces.

What was left of the original defenders on the outside of the kill box tried to break through the Chiss formation to aid their brethren. The Chiss gave way like a tide of water and then closed their ranks again, causing the Yuuzhan Vong to join their less fortunate comrades—right in the middle of the kill box. Remnant and Alliance ships merged with the Chiss attack force and sealed the fate of their trapped foe.

"Jedi Wan, send word to the rest of the fleets, Bilbringi is ours," Admiral Pellaeon finally breathed.
"Gladly, Admiral."
0-[VI]-0 0-[VI]-0
"We—are—insane!" Sannah yelled over the incessant sound of blaster fire and guttural yells. Her lightsaber swept to the air, knocking down a row of razor bugs fired in her direction.
"You're just figuring that out now? Bit slow there Sannah!" Dinua laughed, firing a shoulder-mounted rocket at a cluster of Yuuzhan Vong warriors. She activated her jetpack and, while in the air, looked back to the forces they were leading over the ridge. She jabbed her blaster sky-wards and yelled out. "*Oya Mando'ade! Par Mand'alor!"*
The hundreds of Mandalorian warriors echoed her yell, pumping their fists into the air as they charged up and down the hill towards the entrenched Yuuzhan Vong positions. Explosives whistled by, high and low. Dirt and clods of grass were flung into the air as a magma artillery shell tore apart the ground.
Mandalorian *Gladiator*-class fighters swooped in, guns blazing and obliterated the artillery platforms of the Yuuzhan Vong base. From the air, Dinua rained down death with dozens of her fellow Mandalorians, sheets of superheated slugs pounding the enemy formations. The line of trenches and bunkers the Yuuzhan Vong had dug were completely overwhelmed by their armored foes. Everywhere one looked, there was at least one Mandalorian in sight.
"Sannah has a point you know," Doran said conversationally, his lightsaber flashing as he covered the squadron of advancing Mandalorians. "We were only supposed to be launching diversionary attacks to keep the Outer Rim Yuuzhan Vong garrisons busy."
"Technically we're still doing that," Jintar pointed out, pausing to use his wrist-flamethrower on a ventilation shaft to smoke out several Yuuzhan Vong in an underground tunnel. Coughing and disorientated warriors stumbled out of a nearby bunker, and the Mandalorians shot them down without mercy.
"I don't think the guys who came up with the plan wanted us to launch a full scale assault on the Vong shipyards at Belkadan."
"Doran, this *is* a hit and run operation. We've just added a Mandalorian twist to it. What were you expecting, one of those timid Galactic Alliance-like raids? No offense Uldir."
"None taken! Still prefer those timid hit and run r—aids!" Uldir leaped out of the path of a swarm of razor bugs. They had just broken through the defensive lines and were now pressing onwards into the garrisons of Yuuzhan Vong warriors occupying the thick Belkadan jungle. "I

actually preferred being a rescue pilot more! Less eminent death to worry about!"
The advancing group of Mandalorians and their allies quickly scattered as blast bugs tore apart large chunks of greenery. Another wave of screaming Yuuzhan Vong warriors burst out of the jungle with their amphistaffs set forward. Several warriors made a beeline for Uldir's prone form, but a yellow-bladed lightsaber sliced through the air and decapitated them with a well-aimed throw. The blade flew back into Klin-Fa's hand as the dark-haired young woman leaped into the fray.
"News from Princess Galfridian," Klin-Fa shouted over the din. "Our diversion was a success. The Artoriasi Rebels have managed to penetrate the facility. Expect fireworks soon!"
It was hand-to-hand, sword-to-amphistaff all across the thick jungle. Mandalorians were falling, but the Yuuzhan Vong were falling faster. Added to the confusion were the teams of Freed Ones, most of them native to the Belkadan yorik coral growing facilities, working alongside the Mandalorian squads; disrupting the enemy lines ahead of time and then melting away before they could be caught.
Shortly after Klin-Fa's report, a massive fireball erupted off in the distance, the plume of smoke and flame stretching high up into the sky. The towering coral structure that spired high into the atmosphere trembled at the violent blast. A second massive explosion ripped through the structure, soon followed by a third. The towering structure's upper half snapped, and the coralline creation began to collapse in on itself.
"Those Artoriasi may have been pacifists. But they know how to use those explosives we gave them damn well," Jintar whistled, he then quickly back-stepped as a Yuuzhan Vong warrior thrust his amphistaff at him.
Despite the loss of their base, the warriors fought on, swarming the Mandalorians and their allies.
Sannah, continuing to cover the evacuation of several wounded Mandalorians, shouted over the scrum. "I wonder how the others are doing?"
"Well, from the looks of it, the Adumari and *Kyr'tsad* were successful in their goal," Dinua called back, switching to her bayonet as she landed. She pointed upwards as she did so, blasting a charging Yuuzhan Vong with the gun in her other hand.
In the sky above, the massive ship-growing station that had been in orbit, had been turned into a massive, glowing, debris-spewing, meteor.
"Time to go then," Doran remarked.

"Of course," Jintar remarked. "This is supposed to be a hit and run after all."
The signal went out to the Mandalorian lines across the planet, and at once, they began to pull back.
Breathlessly, both Doran and Sannah clambered into their designated dropship, which began to rise the moment it was full.
Scout tilted her head at them with a relieved grin. "*Su'cuy gar,* you four. Good to see you made it out in one piece."
"*Su'cuy*, Master Esterhazy," Sannah chirped brightly. "Thanks for watching over our way home."
"I have said it was okay to call me 'Scout,' right? I never made Master, much less Knight."
"You're still our Master, well, co-Master," Doran smiled.
The intercom clicked on. "*Heads up, Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements just jumped in. Things are going to get a little rough."*
"Do we know if the Artoriasi made it out?" Sannah glanced to Scout as she tightened her safety harness.
"They have," Scout nodded. "And the Adumari have already jumped out."
"And the reports for the Red Moons and Wraith squadron?" Doran said, anxious to learn about his parents.
"Last report said that they'd achieved their objectives as well," Scout said reassuringly. "I didn't hear of any casualties."
"That's good," Doran leaned against the back of his own chair and let out a relieved laugh. "Well, it looks as if we just helped to give that Supreme Overlord one really, really, really, really bad day."
0-[VII]-0 0-[VII]-0
Supreme Overlord Shimrra Jamaane dismissed Nen Yim with a curt nod of his head. He had given her orders to find weapons to counter an organic ship that was so like their own tech but very, very different. He did his best to control his own fears, his own doubts. There was no doubt that Ekh'm Val had indeed found the fabled planet of which their lore spoke of. The fragment of the original Yuuzhan'tar made whole. But he could not let anyone else know this.
Frustratingly, the treacherous commander had escaped rather than die as commanded, and Shimrra was well aware of the rumors and stories were circulating among every level of his tightly controlled society as a direct result. Yet Nen Yim was the only shaper he could trust with such a task. She had proven adept at Shaping the mabugat kan; creatures which locked onto signals coming from HoloNet nodes and devoured them. Nen Yim had also proven that she was not above Shaping things considered heretical. She knew that her days were numbered. That the

moment she had no use, she would die, yet she Shaped still, worked on the next cortex, because of her sense of duty to her people. Though he hid the truth of the origins of the ship they had captured, he cared not whether she figured out the truth. The moment she uttered it, she and whoever else she talked to would be put to death anyways. She was invaluable, but not so much that he couldn't replace her with another heretic shaper if it called for it.
"*A lot has happened in recent times.*
I've rarely had the moment for songs or rhymes.
Tell me Supreme One oh so great,
What saddens you, burdens you as of late?" Onimi sang.
"Onimi, bring me a villip."
"Yes your grace, I'll do so with great haste!"
Villip in hand, the Supreme Overlord watched as it formed into the face of Nas Choka. "I wish a status update, Warmaster. Do not make me regret promoting you over my own Domain's warriors."
"I live to serve Warmaster. The infidels have launched simultaneous attacks all throughout the galaxy in surprising number and force. Due to the overwhelming nature of the attacks, reinforcements were often tied up in one area when they were sorely needed in another. Over the course of the past week, we have lost our own growing facilities at Belkadan and Sernpidal, and the infidels have regained control of both Fondor and Belbringi. Access to the Outer Rim has now been cut off and our own forces there are little more than isolated garrisons that will fall easily. Despite the fact that we have disrupted their HoloNet, they are still capable of coordinating complex operations. "
"And," Shimrra said lethally. "Just *what* are you doing about all this?"
"Apart from their ability to function without the HoloNet, everything else is according to my plan, Supreme One. Tsavong Lah was a fool to think that a war on this scale could be decided with one decisive battle. What we needed to do was draw the infidels out. Force them to, if I may use one of their sayings, show their hand. After Ebaq Nine and Hutt Space, the infidels think us weak and our days numbered, but I can guarantee victories to match their own. I can assure you that the losses they've inflicted upon us are returned two fold. We may have lost Belkadan and Sernpidal, but we still have our new shipyards in the Deep Core. These shipyards are manned by your most loyal followers, so we know that the infidels are unaware of the forces we have there. We have rebuilt our strategic reserves to replace those lost by Komm Karsh. I require the fleets we have at Koros and Kuar. Give me those ships, Dread One. To teach these infidels that the war is far from over, I need your blessing to use our last reserves and crush their fleets one

by one. The reserves, in combination with the forces I have now will be more than enough for several crushing victories. Victories that could potentially lead to the end of this war. Once our counter-attack is successful, I will make a push for their capital world itself."
Shimrra nodded slowly. "As it was with your predecessor, Warmaster. You will forfeit your life should you fail."
"I will not fail."
0-[VIII]-0 0-[VIII]-0
The trip to Coruscant wasn't exactly the fastest Tahiri had been on. Forced to avoid both Galactic Alliance patrols and Yuuzhan Vong ships, the small scout-ship she and Shaeri were on hand to choose the more scenic of routes. They followed a complicated maze of hyperspace lines that took them all the way out to the Outer Rim, back towards the Core, and then back out into Wild Space. They were only a few days away from Coruscant, but their trip had proven very enlightening. While they traveled, she and Shaeri had gotten to learn more about the six-member crew and the cause they believed in. Two of them were Shamed Ones from Domain Jamaane, three were warriors, and the last was a low-ranking priest of Yun-Yuuzhan. All of them had their own reasons and stories regarding their abandonment of Shimrra and his policies, but at the same time, they also had a frightening devotion to their new leader, this 'Prophet' named Yu'shaa. They may oppose Shimrra and his policies, but their slavish devotion to the views espoused by Yu'shaa was some cause for concern.
"So let me get this straight. This…Yu'shaa claims to have had a vision from the gods that the Jedi would redeem all the Shamed Ones, end the war, and return the Yuuzhan Vong to their true home?" Tahiri said slowly as they ate their evening meal.
"A prophecy," Garagh Jamaane confirmed. "He told the fateful that it was the final prophecy the gods would give him and that the fate of the Yuuzhan Vong now lay in the hands of the *Jeedai*."
"Why the Jedi?" Shaeri asked.
"I do not understand," the warrior frowned. "Do you not see them as avatars of our gods as well?"
"I do," Shaeri nodded. "But why must we wait for someone else to create a future for us when we are capable of creating our own future? Nearly a million of our brothers and sisters do this as we speak, planning the future of our race. All Domains now have their say in the decisions being made. At least all Domains who wish to participate. "
"We have lived under Shimrra for so long that many of us know no other way of living. Things may appear to work now, but we will no doubt fall into the same lies, deceit, and tyranny that marked Shimrra's

and Quoreal's reign." Garagh said. "Was it not the *Jeedai* who first helped to found the Freed Yuuzhan Vong? The *Jeedai* who convinced their government to let this Supreme Council form? Thousands of the Shamed and lower ranking warriors die daily in battle or alone, and only when the *Jeedai* have stepped forward did they even think about rallying. No, the Prophet is right when he says that the gods have given our future to the *Jeedai,* that only the *Jeedai* can determine the fate of us all."

Shaeri bristled at that. "I thought you were a proud warrior who has had his eyes opened—the former head of Shimrra's personal bodyguard turned protector of the Prophet. Do you *still* need someone to tell you how to live and die? Do you *still* see yourself as just another pawn to be manipulated? You made a choice about your future when you abandoned Shimrra. You made another choice when you sought out Zonama Sekot. The Jedi did not order you about then. Your thinking is *exactly* the kind of thinking that will get us to fall back to the old ways."

"Do you truly think the Supreme Council will last?" Garagh said incredulously. "From what information has reached the Prophet's ears, the council spends more time arguing and jockeying for power than worrying about the fate of those left behind on Yuuzhan'tar and those still trapped in the ships of Shimrra's fleet. While your council gets to deliberate in the peace and safety of your capital planet, those on Yuuzhan'tar suffer fates that are oft-times worse than death. How long do you think it will take before power is once again in the hands of one or two Domains? Until Yuuzhan Vong policy is dictated once more by amphistaff instead of words?"

"Then what does the Prophet suggest in turn," Tahiri said evenly. "That we trust the judgment of the gods. When Zonama Sekot appears, the Shamed will be redeemed. When that occurs, the order that has been the natural order since time immemorial will be upset. The *Jeedai* will then lead us, give us direction and prevent us from decay. And when generations have come and gone under the guidance and judgment of the *Jeedai*, avatars of the gods, only then will we be fit to rule ourselves."

"Listen to yourself! How can you even consider yourself freed from Shimrra's beliefs?" Shaeri shouted. "You still sound like a puppet, a slave! I know Jedi, and they do not tell anyone how to live their lives like Shimrra and the priests do. The Jedi lead by example, they give you a direction to start from, a goal in the end. Even if the Supreme Council eventually fails, at least we will have tried to rule ourselves than have another rule us! Do you not have faith in your own people?"

"And what of you, daughter of Domain Jamaane?" Garagh said unexpectedly, staring down Shaeri unflinchingly. "Did you not raise your amphistaff at me and my men simply because we shared the same domain. Did you not have any faith that those of Jamaane can choose a life different than the one offered to them by Shimrra? We both have blinders on, seeing a future only we can see. And only one of those futures can come true. Speak truthfully, do you truly believe that the Supreme Council can survive with all the animosity and diversity between the many domains? That this new Supreme Leader Taan would spend even two days in power without the support of the *Jeedai*? The Prophet has already seen through this. This 'Taan' is just a figurehead with no actual power. The *Jeedai* are the true force behind the scenes. We put up any pretense, act as though this council will come to any good, when the truth behind the throne is so obvious? The Prophet wants to keep all Yuuzhan Vong equal, drop any façade that a council such as Taan's might produce. We as a people are not yet fit to rule ourselves, not so soon after over a millennium of living under one Supreme Overlord or the next. Given that the Prophet's followers number in the thousands, I am not alone in my belief."
"I…"
Tahiri held out a hand. "Garagh, I respect your beliefs and the beliefs of those who follow the Prophet, but Shaeri is right. Jedi are not meant to rule over an entire people, to hold them by the hand and pull them into the future. The most we will do is give you the tools to create your own future and trust that you will do what is best both for your people and for the galaxy."
"And if we go astray?"
"Then you go astray," Tahiri said simply. "I don't claim to be an expert on rebuilding civilizations, or on helping to resettle an entire race, but I understand that you and those who believe like you are wary of what the future may bring. I would be too. The fact is, you can always tell yourself 'we'll be ready to rule ourselves another year, maybe the next one,' but you'll never know if you're ready or not unless you at least try. The Supreme Council is not meant to be a permanent government. If, after settling on Zonama Sekot, the Yuuzhan Vong find themselves better suited with an alternative form of government, the Jedi will of course help ease that transition. The Prophet seems to genuinely care for the wellbeing of the Yuuzhan Vong, I will not fault him for that. But you can't keep looking for someone else to step in and save, redeem, rule, whatever. *Be* that someone who makes a difference, who steps up when no one else will. Words of advice will be the only guidance the Jedi will give. Anymore and we will have no right to call ourselves Jedi."

"Yun-Shuno is wise," murmured one of the Shamed Ones attending the meal.
"She is, "Shaeri agreed softly. "Garagh, one of the ways we can atone as a race for all the damage we done is show that we have at least learn something from all the death and destruction. That the lives of millions upon millions weren't lost in vain. We can't keep our heads down and obey whatever orders we're given without question. Close our eyes to the injustices and wrongdoing of our leaders. Turn a deaf-ear to the suffering and the less fortunate. We have a chance to make the Yuuzhan Vong anew. A chance that probably won't ever come again in a long, long time. Please, help me and all those freed from Shimrra's lies, create that race we'll be proud to be a part of."
"If, after explaining it to him, the Prophet believes that your way is best for our people, then I will indeed help you," Garagh inclined his head. Shaeri managed to hide her disappointment as she returned Garagh's gesture. "Thank you for that, at least."

0-[IX]-0 0-[IX]-0

"Thank you for clearing your schedule and meeting with us, Diktat," Corran Horn remarked as the Corellian Diktat and his advisors filed into the room.
"You've hardly left me any choice," Thrackan Sal-Solo said grumpily, flourishing his robes as he sat down. "And for the record, I do not appreciate negotiations when they have been forced at blaster-point."
"Forced at blaster-point?" Corran said conversationally. "My dear Diktat, I think you have the wrong impression."
"Really? And is it standard Galactic Alliance procedure these days to fill an entire star system with a battle group? Storm the capitol with Jedi and shocktroopers?"
"To be fair, your people did fire at our diplomatic shuttles," Valin pointed out.
Sal's expression soured even further. "Fine, speak your piece Jedi."
Corran began in a polite and even tone. "As you are well aware, the Galactic Alliance and its allies are making a concerted push towards Coruscant in an attempt to end this war. We would be extremely appreciative if the Corellians join us in this venture."
"And what would Corellia gain from such a deal?"
"The protection of the Galactic Alliance and their allies for one," Corran said calmly. "Should Corellia ever be threatened in the future, you will be counted as a friend to the Galactic Alliance and be supported militaristically and logistically. Also, though you have taken a stance of neutrality, surely you are aware that the Yuuzhan Vong won't leave you alone indefinitely? Once they realize that Centerpoint is

completely useless, they'll inflict a terrible revenge on your people for fooling them. They'll torture the leaders, skin them alive, and then impale their bodies for all to see."
"Your cities will be swept aside," Czalpak added. "Reduced to burning heaps of ash. Corellia will be made an example of to all those who dare try and deceive the Yuuzhan Vong."
Sal and his advisors went sheet white as Valin and Jysella helped give their father's and Czalpak's descriptions a greater sense of reality. The Corellian leaders could actually *see* their planet burning, feel their skin being torn from the muscle. Panic rose up in their eyes as they hyperventilated.
It was a testament to Sal's stubbornness that he managed to gather enough strength to bluster. "Was that a threat, Jedi?"
"Not at all," Corran shook his head. "Just stating the facts about what would happen should Corellia fall to the Yuuzhan Vong. And since you abandoned your treaty with the Peace Brigade, I doubt the Yuuzhan Vong will see you as an ally on any level. We're offering you our hands in friendship. If course you don't want it, and want to leave your fates in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong, you're more than welcome to. I just thought you'd want Corellia to be on the winning side of this war."
The doors to the room banged open and a harried messenger sprinted in. "Diktat! Jedi! A Yuuzhan Vong fleet has just arrived on the outer edge of the system!"
"The time for a decision is now, Diktat," Corran said coolly. "If you do not wish our friendship, I will be pulling the rest of the fleet out. We're not ready for a battle here, especially if we know that the system isn't friendly or will welcome our attempts to defend it."
Sal's jaw worked, sweat beading down his face. He looked wildly to his advisors, who were all nodding frantically at him in turn. Sal then looked back to Corran with a forced smile on his face. "Corellia is proud to ally itself to the Galactic Alliance and their allies and looks forward to working with you to end this war."
"And we are honored to have you," Corran bowed.
"Your fleet?" Sal said anxiously.
"Will of course work side-by-side with the Corelian Defense Force to repel the Yuuzhan Vong."
Sal and the other advisors slumped in their chairs in relief.
"If you will excuse us, Diktat," Corran motioned to the Galactic Alliance delegation. "We will return to our ships to help defend this allied world of Corellia."
0-[X]-0 0-[X]-0

Natua was observing the stars from the bridge of the *Right to Rule*, when she felt a frantic message flash through the Force from multiple people. She inhaled sharply before spinning around and looking at a nearby officer. "Get the Grand Admiral, immediately."
The officer's Imperial training kicked in and he took off without any questions asked. Grand Admiral Pellaeon entered the bridge only a few moments later.
"Jedi Wan?"
"Grand Admiral, a Yuuzhan Vong counterattack has begun," she said succinctly, her voice emotionless.
Gilad Pellaeon nodded and snapped at a nearby sensor operator. "Long range sensors, are they picking up anything?"
"Just a few gravimetric distortions on the edge of the system. They're within the standard of error so I didn't think it necessary to report."
"They were microjumps," Natua said, staring down the officer with distain. "Had you listened to my briefing, you would know that it is a standard Yuuzhan Vong tactic to drop in on the edge of the system, assess the situation, and then reappear at the most opportune location."
"Ma'am, these gravimetric distortions just barely lit the sensors, it's more likely that…"
"Alert the rest of the fleet to prepare for battle and have all crew at battle stations," Pellaeon barked. "If the Jedi says we have Vong coming, then we have Vong coming. It's better to be safe than dead."
Klaxon alarms rang out and the bridge was a flurry of activity.
Natua coordinated with Zekk and Bazel, and the Imperial Fleet, Garm Bel Iblis' fleet, and the Chiss were already in the process of maneuvering into battle formation when a large Yuuzhan Vong force dropped out in the Bilbringi system. Pellaeon saw the sheer numbers, as well as the floating behemoth known by the Yuuzhan Vong as a Korr Chokk, and grimaced.
"And here I thought the previous engagement had been a slugging match."
"They're closing fast, Admrial.'
"Our fighter screens are ready?"
"Yes, sir."
Pellaeon watched the Yuuzhan Vong approach, a cloud of locus pushing through the empty space and blotting out stars. "Here we go again."
0-[XI]-0 0-[XI]-0
Admiral Kre'fey had been busy in his office overseeing the logistics of his fleet in the Ralltiir system when the general call for battle rang out

over the ship's intercom. Putting down the datapad, he strode from his office and onto the bridge.
"Report!"
"Admiral! Large Yuuzhan Vong fleet has just emerged from hyperspace and are closing at a high rate of speed. Three Dreadnaughts are leading a force of nearly fifteen capital ships!"
"What?" Admiral Kre'fey's violet eyes blinked in surprise. "Reform the lines, full reverse!
Seff Hellin, who had emerged onto the bridge in time to hear the report, blanched. Even his and Madurrin's boost to their forces wouldn't work this time. Their fleet was still recovering from the last slugging match, with vessels being salvaged and supplies being transferred. The alarms blaring on the ship didn't help his calmness any.
"Smaller Yuuzhan Vong fleet has just dropped in behind us! Ten capital ships, interdictors included. Their gravity wells just went on line, hyperspace isn't an option!"
"Launch fighters and tighten up our formation," Admiral Kre'fey barked. "Have the *Redeemer* and *Mon Adapyne* take our left flank and meet that smaller fleet head on. We need to carve ourselves a path out of this system."
As Admiral Kre'fey spoke, however, plasma missiles from both Yuuzhan Vong fleets were unleashed in a deadly yellow barrage. Galactic Alliance and Tion Hegemony vessels were lit up, with multiple explosions erupting up and down their line. The *Ralroost* shook violently as its already battered haul was devastated in several more locations.
Coralskippers by the hundreds swarmed in, and two *Republic*-class cruisers were ravaged by the seemingly ceaseless barrage of plasma fire. X-wings, A-wings, and E-wings swarmed out in turn, but they were outnumbered several times over.
Admiral Kre'fey took all this in with a grim expression. "So, the Yuuzhan Vong want a round two, huh? Well, we're not going down without a fight."
Seconds later, the bridge of the *Ralroost* was ripped apart by a flurry of flame and metal.
0-[XII]-0 0-[XII]-0
Yaqeel's legs buckled as the message she detected came in loud and clear even when it was from the other side of the galaxy. "Seff!"
Wedge, who had been glancing at a datapad directly behind her, caught her before she fell. "Seff? From Kre'fey's fleet?"

Yaqeel nodded, eyes continued to flutter before springing open in shock. "Yuuzhan Vong counter-attack! They had more ships in reserve than we thought!"
At her utterance, Fondor was once again besieged by another Yuuzhan Vong fleet. This fleet had jumped directly into the center of the Galactic Alliance fleet, ignoring the Hapans and Smuggler's Alliance entirely.
"Sithspawn!" Wedge swore, the ship rocking from the broadsides of three Yuuzhan Vong Mataloks.
Panic filled the air and Wedge was knocked down into the crew-pit as another explosion nearly severed the *Mon Mothma's* bridge tower. Yaqeel managed to stay on her feet, wide-eyed from the sensory information she was receiving from the Force sensitives in other systems.
Keep it together Saav'etu. She mentally chastised herself even though her worry for Seff was gnawing at her.
She looked around and realized that Wedge had been knocked unconscious. Without their commanding officer the bridge descended into further pandemonium. She reached out into the battlemeld for both support and advice. Tesar, Saba, and the rest of the Wild Knights bolstered her strength and knowledge, enabling her to quickly take control of the situation.
"Enough!" Yaqeel shouted, using the Force to project her voice and give it an air of command. Even as a flare erupted on the prow of their ship, she began directing traffic, drawing off of the experiences being shared to her through the battlemeld. "You've all been trained for this. Even if the general is down, we're not out of the fight. We need to do what we did before. Keep our backs to Fondor. Our first goal is to get our fleet out of the way so our allies can fire on the Yuuzhan Vong. Comm, coordinate with the Hapan fleet and pull our left wing back. In this case, retreat is good, but we can't let them push us past Fondor. Have our fighters ease off pressure on our capital ships as best they can."
"And the Smuggler's Alliance, ma'am?"
"Keep them back in reserve. They can take shots if they see them, but we need to save them in case more Yuuzhan Vong arrive."
As the bridge's chaos became more calm and controlled, Yaqeel sent a mental thanks to the other Jedi in the meld. In fact, their support was the only thing still keeping her on her feet as she stared in disbelief at the carnage occurring all around the *Mon Mothma*. Had it not been for the Jedi meld, she was quite sure that she too would have descended into the panic that had consumed everyone.

"*Blue Jewel* and *Infinite Spiral* have been cut off from the rest of our fleet and taking a pounding, they are requesting assistance."
Yaqeel shook herself again. Both the *Jewel* and *Spiral* were Mon Calamari cruisers and were two of their heavy hitters. Losing them would be a drastic blow to their efforts. "Get Rogue squadron and the Wild Knights to punch a hole. Have the *Far Thunder* and *Brilliant Fire* follow them in."
"If we have the *Far Thunder* and *Brilliant Fire* change positions, our own flank will be exposed," the sensor-operator protested. "Our shields are just barely hanging in there, and the Hapans are too far away to cover us."
"One heavily damaged ship for two intact juggernauts," Yaqeel pointed out, hearing Saba Sebatyne's thoughts. "Though they won't be intact if we wait much longer. Comm, give the order."
"You heard her, Lieutenant," Wedge said, stepping up behind Yaqeel with a bleeding contusion on his forehead. He shooed away a medic trying to tend to him and level his most intimidating gaze at the junior officer. "Give the order."
"Yes, sir!"
"Thanks for stepping in," Wedge murmured to an obviously mentally exhausted teen as the ship maneuvers were relayed.
"Anytime," Yaqeel muttered, finally collapsing to her knees in relief. "Just not in the near future. Don't get knocked out at the start of a battle again, okay?"
"I'll try not to," Wedge laughed. "Come on, this battle isn't over yet."
0-[Chapter End]-0
A\N: Fifteen chapters to go! Next chapter tomorrow…it's only a day a way.

ADA 54

Fifty-Four
0-[I]-0 0-[I]-0
They had just received word from the couriers, and the situation within the War Room on Mon Calamari was solemn. The members of the Senate and High Council were present, with the former looking pale and the others looking grim.
Cal Omas finished listening to the last report, then turned towards the others with a heavy expression. "We've managed to keep Bilbringi secure. But the Yuuzhan Vong have retaken Fondor and a second fleet has advanced through the Perlemian Trade Route right up until Taanab. A third has stalled our approach through the Corellian Run and

General Panib is currently fighting a pitch battle with their fleet in both the Duro and Corellian systems."
"Admiral Kre'fey and General Antilles?" One of the senators spoke up.
"That's right, wasn't Princess Leia and Captain Solo with Antilles' fleet?" Another asked.
"We've lost the territory that took us a week and a half to gain, in four days?" A third said in disbelief.
Cal Omas held their gazes remorsefully as he held out his hands to silence their outcries. "That is not all. We have confirmation that the *Ralroost* was destroyed in battle. Admiral Traest Kre'fey and Tion Hegemony Admiral Miras Kal were killed in that engagement. Most of the joint Galactic Alliance and Tion Hegemony force under his command have been lost. General Farlander is said to be in critical condition and his ship among those that did not make it. At the moment, Jedi Knight Tekli and Jedi Master Madurrin are rallying the survivors and attempting to make a new stand at Taanab. They intend to keep the Yuuzhan Vong from pushing into the Tion Hegemony itself, but have requested reinforcements."
"What about our fleet that was at Fondor?" A representative from the Hapes Consortium asked.
"As far as we know, the Hapan forces are still relatively intact," Cal Omas answered. "The Galactic Alliance fleet was hardest hit, taking sixty-five percent casualties. General Antilles managed to make a fighting retreat, deciding to give up Fondor in favor of saving as many of his ships as he could. Unfortunately, he has reported the loss of General Pash Cracken and the *Memory of Ithor.* At last word both Princess Leia and Captain Solo were still among the living."
The news was sobering, and the senators and delegations within the room appeared to mull over the potential consequences of the losses of two fleets.
"Are we still continuing with the plan to push to Coruscant?" Senator Releqy A'kla spoke up.
"No," Sien Sovv answered. "We'll currently hold positions at Bilbringi and attempt to reinforce General Panib by redirecting General Antilles and what's left of his fleet towards Corellia."
"We've already let the Jedi embedded within the Imperial forces know that Madurrin and Tekli need assistance," Cilghal said. "And we've received confirmation from Jedi Knight Zekk and Jedi Apprentices Natua, and Bazel. Whether those forces can get to Taanab before another Yuuzhan Vong push is a different story."
"What I want to know is how the Yuuzhan Vong had so many ships in reserve and how we knew absolutely nothing about them," an upset

senator voiced. He spun and pointed a finger at Taan and the delegation of Freed Yuuzhan Vong in attendance. "Wasn't it *your* responsibility to seek out information like this? We just lost thousands of lives because your people assured us Shimrra only had, at most, a hundred capital ships at his disposal."
"Not every intelligence network is infallible," Taan replied. "Shimrra must have adopted new tactics in light of the increasing numbers of defectors. With the numbers he brought to bear against our joint forces, there is no doubt he has established shipyards in yet-to-be identified system or systems. My people are currently searching for those locations as we speak."
"A bit too late for that, don't you think, *Supreme Leader*. Admiral Kre'fey's dead. General Farlander is at death's door. And General Cracken is lost! We've had to surrender Fondor *again*!"
"Senator Ulur," Cilghal said calmingly. "Please. Instead of assigning blame, deserved or otherwise, what we must do is concentrate on a new tactic. The strategy was not a completely failure and we *have* gained some ground despite this surprise Shimrra had for our people."
"I could not have said that better myself," Senator Thuv Shinev of the Tion Hegemony spoke. "Our primary concern should be reinforcing Jedi Knight Tekli's forces. The Tion Hegemony had sent its full battle fleet with Admiral Kre'fey. If any of that fleet survived, they are all that remains between the Yuuzhan Vong and the fall of my government. Director bel-dar-Nolek is already considering entering into negotiations with the Yuuzhan Vong in light of their approach."
"How secure is Bilbringi? Can we really afford to move our forces around in face of these unknown shipyards at Shimrra's disposal?" Acting-Director of Intelligence and Justice Minister, Senator Ta'laam Ranth spoke.
"We're currently pouring all of our resources into locating these shipyards," Taan said smoothly. "We expect them to be somewhere in the Core or Deep Core, otherwise we would have found them already."
"Truly?"
"Yes," Sien Sovv clasped his hands together in support of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong leader. "Since the Hutts have regained control of their territory, and the Imperials their own, our awareness of the Outer Rim has grown considerably. We know, for example, that the Mandalorians and Wraiths hit both Belkadan and Sernpedial and caused major damage to the Vong shipyards there. With the Hutts, Tion Hegemony, Bakurans, and Empire forming cornerstones, we can be safe in saying that there are no further Yuuzhan Vong targets of high significance left in the Outer Rim. In analyzing the approach vectors of the counter-

attack, we can also be assured that the Vong reinforcements arrived on a course that takes them from the Core worlds. In light of this fact, another military push is not advisable unless we are sure of a victory. Paradoxically, the longer we wait to plan our next attack, the more ships the Yuuzhan Vong will be able to bring to bear unless we destroy these shipyards.
Ayddar spoke next. "Due to the unsuccessful nature of our attack, we should also be prepared for an eventual attack on this planet. If the new Warmaster is at all competent, which he has shown he is, he will use this change in momentum and launch a full-scale invasion of this planet. Just as we tried to do, he will attempt to cut off his enemy's head."
Cal Omas took in a breath and released it slowly. "Though it would have been nice of our strategy worked, it didn't. Our new primary goals are to keep the Tion Hegemony from capitulating, and to repel any Yuuzhan Vong counter-attack. Directors, any idea when the Bilbringi shipyards can start producing ships again?"
The two Intelligence Directors glanced briefly at each other before Ta'laam spoke. "We will need at least a month, maybe two, to get the machinery up and running again. Another month after that to start producing fighters and small assault craft. If you want capital ships, that's still at least another two months on top of that. The facilities were left in very poor condition so our people are doing the best they can."
"It would have been the same story with Fondor," Ayddar said. "Even if we do devote resources to try and take it again, any output of significant note won't be possible for at least four months. We'll have to make do with the Kuati shipyards at the moment, although the Imperials assure me that Yaga Minor will once again be functional and productive in two months' time."
"In light of these recent losses, wouldn't it be wise to revisit the Imperial contingency plan?" another senator voiced.
"Not an option," Danni said firmly. "As long as the science teams are under my control, Omega Blue will *never* be an option."
"And if the alternative is more lives loss, Director Quee? If, by sticking to our morals, we lose Antilles, Panib, and all the others bravely risking their necks because we didn't have the guts to do what must be done?" The Rodian Senator Moog Ulur argued. "My *entire people* have been turned into monsters. The Rodians exist now only in isolated colonies and those who were lucky enough to be on ships when Rodia fell. Do you want the same thing to happen to the Tion Hegemony? To Dac? There comes a time when our morals must be tossed aside in the

face of plain logic. Omega Blue will kill Vong at no risk to our people. So what if Shimrra has new shipyards? Omega Blue is an equalizer, a game changer. We have reserves of it, I say we use it!"
"Listen to me carefully, Senator Ulur," Danni said in a low voice. "Not. An. Option. I empathize with you, but answering genocide with genocide will set a dangerous precedent. The Omega Blue stockpiles we have are purely for research only. Those stockpiles were instrumental in our countering of the slaveseeds. Of creating a coral-dissolving solvent for use on Vongformed worlds. Of creating the antidotes for the amphistaff venom. We are even close to coming up with a vaccine for Omega Blue so it won't ever be a threat again. This war is not lost just because a few battles went wrong for us after so many victories. Our losses were many times heavier in the first few years of this war alone. This war can be won, will be won, *without* Omega Blue."
"And the Jedi will definitely vote against its use," Kenth Hamner said in support of the blond scientist.
"As will I," Releqy A'kla said, receiving several other votes agreeing with her view shortly after.
Moog Ulur's expression soured. "Fine, sacrifice your women, children, home-worlds. Let the war drag on and drain our resources! Don't come crying back to the Senate when you discover your entire peoples have been Shaped and made a mockery of."
The Rodian senator stormed out of the room.
There was an awkward silence. Cilghal was next to speak up. "I believe we were about to discuss alternative strategies for winning this war."
Sien Sovv blinked, but stepped forward. "Well yes, here's what I had in mind..."
0-[II]-0 0-[II]-0
Seff Hellin groaned and weakly opened his eyes. He tasted the coppery and very unpleasant taste of blood on his tongue.
"Easy," he heard Tekli whisper, the Chadar Fan's snout twitching as she hurried to his side. "Try not to move."
"Tekli?"
"Conserve your strength," Tekli counseled. "You were spaced and just barely hanging onto life when you were picked up."
"Spaced?" Seff feebly turned his head. "Where am I?"
"Inside the makeshift hospital we've set up on Taanab," Tekli answered. "The planet was mostly razed when the Yuuzhan Vong took the system a while back, so we have to make do with what we have."

As the battle flashed through Seff's mind, the sandy-haired Jedi jerked into a seated position. "Admiral Kre'fey!" He instantly regretted his sudden movement.
Tekli made a noise of displeasure and pushed him back down. "You were spaced and covered in enough lacerations to kill anyone. Don't move!"
"Yes, doctor," Seff groaned.
Tekli redressed his wounds with a fresh bacta patch. She hesitated a moment, then said, "Admiral Kre'fey did not survive the engagement. We've recovered his body and are keeping it until we can send it back to Bothawui."
Seff let out a rush of air and concentrated on the ceiling of the pre-fab shelter. "Then who's next in command, General Farlander?"
The Chadra Fan healer placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "He is alive, but in a Force-assisted coma so his body can recover from the extensive wounds he received. Bacta is in limited supply and his last order to me was to save it for the others."
"Oh," Seff whispered, involuntarily shrinking in his cot. "So what's going to happen now?"
Tekli finished tending to his injuries. "For now, enter a healing trance and try to recover as best you can. Master Madurrin is in orbit with the few ships we have left, while I'm taking care of the wounded with the few doctors we have left. We expect the Yuuzhan Vong to arrive in another few days, and our help to arrive after that."
"And I thought we were in trouble now," Seff murmured, strangely unafraid of what that information entailed. He reached out into the Force to check on his friends, exhaling when he realized that they were all still alive. "I'll enter that healing trance. You just keep up the good work, Tekli."
Tekli inclined her head politely. "May the Force grant you a speedy recovery. We're going to need everyone if we're going to survive this."
0-[III]-0 0-[III]-0
Valin Horn winced as he picked himself off of the soot-strewn deck of the *Sentinel.* One of the bad things about relying on couriers was that the message they contained was already days old by the time they reached their destination. In the time General Panib had sent off their last courier to Mon Cal, to the present, the situation had deteriorated badly.
Through no fault of their own, Corellia had been lost.
Despite the best efforts of the joint Bakuran-Bothan-Hutt forces, Thrackan Sal-Solo decided to be an annoyingly predictable turncoat and threw in his lot with the approaching Yuuzhan Vong forces. After

two days of battling above Corellia and Duro, the moment it appeared as if the position of the Bakuran-Bothan-Hutt fleet had become untenable, CorSec vessels added to the chaos and opened fire on their newly minted allies. Casualties had been heavy, and the allied fleet had been forced to retreat to Duro and to try and hold their ground there.

But with the Yuuzhan Vong forces now being reinforced by the full resources Corellia had to offer, it was a losing battle. Unlike the untouched status of Corellia, Duro had only just begun their recovery efforts and was not in any condition to support a massive battle fleet. Fighting over the Duro system was entering its fifth day, and man and machine were wearing out in the face of the well-supplied and well-equipped Vong-Corellian forces.

What made matters worse was for Valin was that his sister and father were still trapped on Corellia. They had been present, along with Lowbacca and a small security team, to debrief CorSec on how to spot Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators and sympathizers. The irony of it wasn't lost on Valin, but he wasn't exactly appreciative of that fact and his worry for them kept him distracted. Something he could ill-afford at the moment.

Hissing at the stinging sensation from the new gash on his knee, Valin gripped a nearby chair to help steady himself. The Yuuzhan Vong leading the assault would launch tiring knife-like attacks directly into the center of their fleet, then withdraw before they could become too embroiled in the battle. Valin wasn't sure if 'death by a thousand cuts' could apply to a fleet-to-fleet battle, but it was an apt cliché for their situation. Every deep thrust by the Vong fleet took out more vessels and strained the already burn-out nerves of the Bakuran-Bothan-Hutt forces. These attacks had been occurring almost non-stop for the past week, and showed no sign of ending any time soon.

"Commander Yurf Col is reporting that Duro squadron just lost the *Dpso* in that run," a bloodied comm-operator reported over the incessant wailing of the klaxon alarms. "The Hutts also say that the *Nal Teesa* has been knocked out of commission."

"At least we know the Vong will withdraw now," General Panib said darkly.

Sure enough, the quick-strike by the Vong force was over, and their forces were already micro-jumping back out to the edge of the system.

"Blast it," Panib muttered under his breath. He shook his head. "Get me a damage report and a list of the latest casualties."

"Yes, sir."

"Jedi Horn."

Valin started. "Yes, sir?"
"I know you're worried about your family, but I need your head here and now. Is there any way you can use your Force to predict when the Vong will attack next?"
"I can't sense them in the Force, sir," Valin said, his frustration clear in his voice as he wracked his mind for answers. If he couldn't do anything then he was completely useless and more people would die. He *had* to come up with something. Anything.
"Then High Command better have come up with something real quick otherwise we'll have to pull back. The Vong commander has switched up his strategy and is using tactics we haven't seen before. We can't keep taking casualties like this and hold the system at the same time."
Valin clenched his hands into fists, fighting back tears as he continued to mentally review everything he had learned from Anakin and the others about the Vong and their relationship to the Force.
Relax Valin blinked when he felt his father's presence gently reach out to him. *Relax Valin.*
"Dad," Valin whispered softly, on the verge of tears. He'd have liked to blame the smoke-filled bridge for his watery eyes, but the heavy clenching feeling in his chest wasn't going to let him fool himself. "Dad, I don't know what to do. I can't help them."
Clear your mind first, Valin. Jysella and myself are safe for the moment. Don't worry about us, focus on your present. Panicking will not help anyone. Relax.
"I have to do something," Valin breathed, seating himself cross-legged on the deck, and trying to take in several calming breaths.
Think about your situation. Tell me nothing else but what must be done.
"I have to at least detect the hit-and-run attacks by the Vong and Corellians," Valin's lips moved only slightly as he focused on his link to his father.
Good. Now what can you do to detect those attacks.
"I don't have Vongsense so I…"
Don't tell me what you <u>can't</u> do, tell me what you <u>can</u> do. His father's mental speech was soothing and patient. Valin exhaled shakily again, gripping his knees.
"When I try to sense the Vong in the Force, I only feel their absence in it."
Is that not also a way of sensing them? Remember, everything is connected through the Force, and if Vong aren't…
Valin blinked in comprehension. As his emotional turmoil subsided, he suddenly remembered what he had done back in Imperial Space

against Torkal Vorrik when the warrior had been wearing a Cloak of Nuun. "I can sense their approaching attacks by the absence they create in the Force whenever they move. Like triangulating their location, I can use the Force that exists everywhere else to feel when they approach. "
Knew you could do it, Valin.
Valin smiled weakly. "Thanks dad."
Kick Vong butt for Jysella and me.
Valin took one last breath. "Stay safe you two."
You as well. And Valin.
"Yeah?"
You're definitely growing up faster than I would have liked, but you're growing up nonetheless. Make me proud.
Valin bowed his head. "I will dad."
General Panib, who was waiting patiently for Valin to finish, tilted his head kindly. "Well, Jedi Horn?"
Valin rose from his brief meditation, new purpose gleaming in his eyes. "It might take some trial an error, but I think I can help predict the Vong attacks. This battle isn't over just yet."
0-[IV]-0 0-[IV]-0
As a Jedi Apprentice who had stopped Yuuzhan Vong invasions and helped to liberate worlds, Yaqeel Saav'etu *had* figured that she was prepared for anything life was willing to throw at her. The loss of Fondor, however, changed her mind. She was no stranger to defeat, being one of the apprentices who had failed to completely stop the Yuuzhan Vong terrorist attack on Mon Calamari. But even then that had paled in comparison to what she had seen.
Nothing could have prepared her for the carnage, the feelings she felt in the Force from an entire starship's crew dying in a fiery blaze. At least on Mon Calamari she hadn't seen any of the bodies of the civilians who had died in the attack. But at Fondor, she had seen body parts and corpses float past the bridge tower, visited the hangar bay where wounded were being brought in by the dozens. She had seen things very few fourteen year olds should have to see. And she was sure she would have been traumatized if not for the constant support she was receiving from the Jedi meld.
Even then, she couldn't help but hang out on the gantry ways high above the activity occurring in the hanger.
"You appear pensssive."
"Yeah," Yaqeel tried to put on a brave face as Tesar Sebatyne took a seat next to her. She respected Tesar and thought him a fairly skilled Jedi, but she had never really befriended the odd Barabel. To her, the

Barabels and Bothans were too different culturally. Besides, Tesar had the Wild Knights, and they were all older than her, and she didn't feel like intruding on their own close band of friends. Just thinking about Tesar and his friends once again reminded her of the people she was missing. "I was remembering everyone we lost at Fondor and how we were so lucky we didn't lose more."
"Luck?" Tesar emitted a hissing laugh as he sat next to her, their feet hanging over the edge of the walkway. "Do not belittle yourself, Saav'etu. Lives were saved due to your ability to ssseize command of the bridge when General Antilles waz incapacitated. You kept the fleet from falling apart and managed to get our alliez to safety."
"We still lost Cracken, and most of the right flank of the Galactic Alliance formation," Yaqeel sighed, feeling the Barabels and other Jedi draw away her distress. Similar to what had occurred during the Jedi meeting on Coruscant, they drew away and shared the despair she felt, making it more manageable. "And I'm worried about my friends too. I know Seff is badly hurt, and Barv was burned. And with this Yuuzhan Vong counter-attack, the fighting's only just beginning again. We're going to lose more and I don't want Natua, or Valin, or Sella to be the next ones I feel hurting."
"It iz fortunate I am able to hunt with the other Barabelz." The Barabel Knight slapped the metal walkway with his tail as he empathized with her. "They keep the worry at bay and the mind focused. It iz a shame the Bothanz do not have a sssimilar ability. Then all you would have to do iz concentrate on the hunt."
"Definitely a shame," Yaqeel breathed, watching several pilots being cut free of their mangled fighters.
"Have you eaten yet?" Tesar asked lightly.
Yaqeel glanced at him askance. "Haven't really been hungry since I lost my last lunch when those bodies floated by the bridge window."
"Come, join the rest of the Wild Knightz," Tesar said, standing back up and offering her a hand. "You may have friendz on the other side of the galaxy, but you have friendz here too. That iz the good thing about being a Jedi, about being a part of a fighter squadron. You are never without friendz or family and we all support each other. You may not think it, Saav'etu, but the Wild Knightz consider you one of uz as well. You are a Jedi, you are brave and do not run away from your friends when they need you, and that is enough."
Yaqeel swallowed heavily, her fur bristling in agitation. "Tesar…I…I don't know. I just…"
"Will all Jedi and command staff please report to the briefing room? Repeat, Jedi and command staff report to the briefing room."

"I guez food will have to wait," Tesar shrugged, helping Yaqeel to her feet.
The two Jedi abandoned their ceiling-high perch in the hangar and quickly made their way through the *Mon Mothma*. As they passed through various corridors, construction crews were already hard at work at repairing the myriad of breaches and grutchin-inflicted damages. It didn't seem like they could pass through one hallway without seeing at least one repair crew busy trying to restore the ship back to fighting shape.
They supposed that they were lucky that the Yuuzhan Vong commander had decided to consolidate his gains at Fondor and not pursue General Antilles' fleeing fleet further afield. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet was still only a quick hyperspace jump away, with the surviving Hapan, Galactic Alliance, and Smuggler's Alliance vessels holing up at the nearby Mrlsst system for the time being.
The doors to the briefing room slid open, and the Jedi took their seats among the gathered Wild Knights and officers. Also present was Dukat Aleson Gray from Hapes, and Lilmit, representing the Smuggler's Alliance.
"The couriers just arrived with our new orders," Wedge began without any preamble. "We are to abandon our attempts to retake Fondor and join up with the allied forces assembled at Corellia."
"So we are admitting our defeat?" Aleson scowled. "The Galactic Alliance lost thousands of lives. Five Hapan vessels were destroyed. Are we to let their deaths, their sacrifices, go just like this? We were caught off-guard by the counter-attack. But now that we are aware of…"
"Dukat Gray," Wedge said, once again demonstrating his infinite amount of patience by keeping his voice level. "We were ordered to pull back. An order is an order. In war, casualties are expected. If, of course, you wish to contact the Queen Mother and see if she has any orders to the contrary, you can be my guest. The Hapan fleet is more than welcome to wait here for any courier's return. In the meantime, the Galactic Alliance and the Smuggler's Alliance will be joining the Corellian fleet."
Aleson deflated faster than squished Hutt, dourly falling silent.
"As I was saying," Wedge continued, as if nothing had occurred. "Our new orders are to assist General Panib and aid his holding of Corellia and Duro. At the moment, they are the last Galactic Alliance held positions within the Core and it is imperative we keep hold them if we want to have any foothold in Yuuzhan Vong space."
"That makez sense," Saba Seabtyne said with a nod.

"General, will the Smuggler's Alliance continue to assist in this mission?" Lilmit piped up. Since Anja's death, he had taken up a more active role in the Smuggler's Alliance, fast emerging as one of their most reliable and fearless leaders.
Wedge shook his head. "You'll be off-loading whatever supplies you can afford, and then moving back to support Bakura with some of our more heavily damaged ships. With the Yuuzhan Vong having managed to stall us in this arm of the galaxy, we don't want them retaliating against one of our allies."
"Understood," Lilmit saluted briefly. "I'll start coordinating the dispersal of our supplies then."
Wedge dismissed him, and then looked to the non-Force sensitive officers. "Colonel Celchu will be receiving a temporary field promotion to general and will fill in for General Cracken. He'll be returning with the Smuggler's Alliance and our damaged ships and leading the defense of Bakura. Start transferring our wounded and ensuring that our ships are in fighting condition. If there are any doubts about a ship's abilities, send the ship with the Smuggler's Alliance. We'll be pushing deep into enemy territory, and I want to make sure we don't lose anyone due to technical glitches."
The officers saluted and were likewise dismissed. This left the Hapans and Jedi.
"Dukat Gray, will you be joining us at Corellia or waiting her for orders from the Queen Mother?"
"Hapes will assist the Galactic Alliance in this endeavor, of course," Aleson said as pompously as he could manage after he cleared his throat.
"Glad to hear it. I'll leave you to your preparations then," Wedge said. "Though I cannot order it, I'm strongly recommending that any of your damaged vessels join the convoy to Bakura."
"I will take that under consideration, if you will excuse me, General." Aleson left, and the Barabel members of Wild Knight emitted a hissing laughter at his retreat.
"After informing the High Council of the incident that unfolded at Fondor, I actually have a piece of good news to deliver," Wedge smiled at Yaqeel. "Jedi Apprentice Yaqeel Saav'etu, due to your growth in this past year, and in light of your bravery and calm in the face of mighty peril, the Jedi of the High Council have seen fit to bestow upon you the rank of Jedi Knight. Unfortunately, we can't exactly give you a ceremony full of all the pomp and circumstance that the others had, but you've been made a Knight nonetheless. Also the Galactic Alliance

Fleet Command has seen fit to give you an honorary rank of lieutenant and award you a medal for your gallantry. "
Yaqeel's eyes were wide in disbelief and her mouth opened and closed several times before she finally managed a weak 'thank you' as Wedge handed her a gleaming star-shaped medal. The Wild Knights cheered for the bewildered looking young Bothan when she walked back to them, and Tesar clapped her arm supportively.
Wedge, in the meantime, took a step back and smiled, allowing the young, newly made Knight to enjoy her accomplishments. Despite his happiness for Yaqeel, he understood that there was an ulterior reason for the advancement. It was as much a morale boost as it was a recognition of her skills. After losing two engagements with heavy casualties, the higher-ups in command wanted to give the crews at least something to celebrate. Due to the rising popularity of the Jedi, especially the younger ones—some of whom were treated like the young sibling, child, or friend, the rank-and-file had left behind—it was important to keep the minds and hearts of the soldiers and the Jedi uplifted. And of course, since it was widely acknowledged that Yaqeel had saved the fleet at Fondor, what better way to celebrate than to officially recognize her contributions.
After a few seconds, he spoke once more. "In light of that good news, I'll need to rely on you Jedi even more in the coming days. Hopefully, by increasing your number with the Second Fleet, we'll be able to pull off more of your Force-assisted tricks than before. We took a hit at Fondor, but now it's time to show Shimrra it'll take a lot more than that to knock us out of the fight."
0-[V]-0 0-[V]-0
"Go to that side of the galaxy. Okay, now got to the other side of the galaxy. What's that? There's a new threat on the opposite corner? Well, you're a Jedi Knight so you might as well go check it out. Of course, sir. I enjoy jetting off to the opposite ends of the galaxy. It's always been my lifelong dream."
"Is he always like this?" Natua Wan blinked.
Zekk nodded. "Sadly, yes."
"Talking to one's self isn't really healthy though, is it?"
"It's Ganner," Zekk shrugged.
"And his choice of dress?"
"The red stormtrooper armor parts and cape?"
"Yes."
"It's Ganner."
"And he is supposed to resemble the model Jedi for the countless trillions of people who watch his interviews on the HoloNet?"

"Which is why we're lucky the HoloNet is down at the moment."
"Very lucky," Natua nodded.
"'It's Ganner' can hear you two you know," Ganner drawled, leaning back in his chair to look at the two other Jedi.
They were part of a taskforce that had been hastily dispatched to reinforce Tekli and the others. While Kyp's Dozen, Bazel, the Chiss, and most of the Imperials stood guard over Bilbringi, Garm Bel Iblis and the Death Knights were en route to the Inner-Rim planet of Taanab. Unfortunately, the location was still a long ways away due to the nebulous warfronts within Wild Space and the Mid-Rim. Systems were occupied, or they weren't. Suffering from gravimetric anomalies that disrupted hyperspace travel, or just plagued with lawlessness and fleeing refugees. They were moving in an 'S' shape route, winding through both the Expansion Region and the Colonies in an attempt to avoid the more well-known Yuuzhan Vong garrisons, en route to their Mid Rim location. As fast as the reinforcements were going, they'd be lucky to reach Taanab before the week was out.
"I am curious about something, Media Boy," Natua said. "Were you not enjoying your time with the Imperials? Not that you are not wanted or anything, but I would have thought you would have stayed with them to help guard Bilbringi."
Ganner smiled a small smile, his presence in the Force dimming ever so slightly as he grew solemn. "It's Tekli I guess."
"Tekli?"
"Well, to be more precise, it's Myrkr. I mean, Tekli, Zekk, and I all came out of that alive somehow. Formed one heck of a bond. And since Anakin isn't available to rush to Tekli's rescue this time around, I figured I'd try to fill in his shoes for a bit. Bilbringi will be around no matter what. But when it comes to the people who were with me on Myrkr…Let's just say I'm not willing to let another one die if I can't help it."
"Oh," Natua said, seeing Ganner in a new light. For the younger Jedi, Ganner had always been that larger-than-life character with a big ego and an even bigger stage-presence. He seemed like the *least* likely candidate for a Jedi, yet the public loved him. As Natua was learning though, all of Ganner's grandstanding and flamboyant personality was all an act, a shield of sorts. He had confronted the horrors of war by *not* dealing with it, deflecting it. Yet, Myrkr had stripped away that shield and had changed Ganner greatly. Instead of himself, his new focus was on extending his shield to protect his fellow Jedi. As lighthearted as he was, any threat to his friends was definitely punishable by an evil glare

and a stern talking to; quickly followed by a lightsaber blade if you didn't back off.
Having always been on the fringes of Valin Horn's little group of friends due to her Falleen nature, it was only recently that Natua had begun acquainting herself with what it meant to actually build friendships. And what war did to said friendships. She fully understood Ganner's point of view. Now that she actually had people she could consider friends, she wasn't keen on giving them up any time soon.
"We will get there in time, do not worry," Natua said to Ganner. "The Force would not have set us into motion only for us to fail."
Ganner winked at the Falleen apprentice as he slid back into his normal playful persona. "Thanks Green Girl. I'd like to think that way too. And Tekli's a tough little rodent, she'll be fine."
"The only question is, will Garm Bel Iblis and us be enough to hold back the tide?" Zekk voiced. "We are talking about a Yuuzhan Vong fleet that bested Kre'fey and Farlander."
"Has anyone told you you could be a bit too pessimistic at times?" Ganner leaned back in his chair again to look at Zekk with a raised eyebrow.
"Realistic," Zekk pointed out. "Any Vong commander who was smart enough to out maneuver Kre'fey shouldn't be underestimated. Even when Garm Bel Iblis is a genius in his own right, we have only a quarter of the ships Kre'fey had at his disposal."
"And I thought I had had my share of suicide missions," the ship's pilot, former Imperial-turned-Rebel, Juno Eclipse, sighed. "There *has* to be something wrong with the Jedi and their sanity in general."
"Hey, it's not a suicide mission," Ganner said brightly. "Just a mission with a very high chance of becoming one with a great burning ball of metal that used to be your fighter or ship; and a very low chance of coming out of the battle as two separate entities."
"I see that Jedi still don't change, no matter what the time period," the blond-haired pilot muttered. She glanced at her teenage co-pilot "You see why your father decided to train you and Mallie instead of sending you off to the Jedi academy, Rahm?"
"I am not too sure. There is not much difference between father and them," Rahm Merek said in his inherited Imperial accent.
Juno's expression shifted slightly as her thoughts took her back to the other half of her family. "You can still sense your sister and father, right?"
Rahm closed his eyes for a second, and then nodded. "Still alive and unharmed. They send their greetings."

The pilot exhaled, briefly closed her own eyes in relief. "Thank the Force for small mercies."
"The rest of their family is on Corulag," Ganner explained to the others in a soft voice.
Natua and Zekk nodded grimly. As part of the original attack plan, rebel groups up and down the Perlemian trade route were supposed to rise up ahead of the arrival of Kre'fey's fleet. With Kre'fey defeated, however, many of those rebel groups suffered severe repercussions when the Yuuzhan Vong struck back.
"Ganner's right," Zekk said reassuringly. "This isn't a suicide mission. If we're careful and don't overplay ourselves, we'll be able to survive to fight another day."
"That's the spirit," Ganner said. He then looked to Natua. "Come on Jedi *Knight* Wan, where's your sage advice of the day?"
Still not used to her own promotion, Natua canted her head to hide her embarrassment. Falleen were hardly the most emotional of races, but embarrassment was definitely a universal feeling. "I already gave my reassuring words to you, Jedi Rhysode. I am afraid I am out of words of wisdom and reassurance."
"See, mother," Rahm said. "No difference between father and them."
"It *must* be a Jedi thing then," Juno sighed. "How much longer is this trip?"
Rahm checked the readout. "Another two days, at least."
"Oh joy."

0-[VI]-0 0-[VI]-0

Beneath the black sky of Yuuzhan'tar, a cloaked figure silently slipped out of the damutek that had once been her home, her prison. Despite it being the Supreme Overlord's own compound, the ever-vigilant elite guards saw nothing and remained in their places. The singing ulubs, which made an unholy sound if they detected the body-warmth of a passing individual, remained silent. The figure traversed the threshold of the compound and out into the darkened streets of the planet.
Yuuzhan'tar, once known as Coruscant, had not always been dark. Had never once known true darkness in its recent memories. For millennia, it had been lit up with unnatural lighting, glowing signs, heat and noxious fumes rising into the air and trapping the artificially-produced energies. Mirror stations, weather stations, nothing about the planet had been natural for a very long time. A push of a button created rains, another button to redirect sunlight when daytime should have long been over. The planet had been dead in one sense, yet more alive in another.

Yet the machines, the unnatural light fixtures, the noxious fumes, all were gone with the fall of the planet. Its weather, so long controlled and manipulated, was returning to its natural state. A layer of fluffy clouds blotted out the stars in the sky. The fumes had been dispersed, absorbed by living creatures brought in by the Yuuzhan Vong. Synthetic duracrete structures were slowly succumbing to the enzymes and creatures taking it apart. Slowly, the planet was healing, its scars soothed by the myriad of creatures brought in to shape it. Never in all its history had Coruscant been so quiet, so peaceful.

And despite the natural order of things slowly returning, Nen Yim couldn't help but feel a great amount of disquiet. She had been raised on a Worldship, nurtured by an organism that had been molded and formed into something that would care for her and the million others who grew up alongside her. The Worldship might have been living, but there had been nothing natural about it. Like most creatures in the use of the Yuuzhan Vong, it had been Shaped in every possible manner, until it only vaguely resembled the creature it had once been. Nen Yim could not deny that she much preferred that sort of controlled environment. That unregulated things like weather and temperature were as alien to her as the planet she was now on. If given a choice, she would have preferred to have a say in what went on in the environment around her. She was a Shaper after all.

And it was her abilities as a shaper that was providing her these few, rare moments of freedom. The freedom would not last long. If she did not return to her damutek, to her prison, in another couple of hours, questions would begin to be asked. Searches would commence. And then, not even her Shaping would be able to get her out of the trouble she would be in.

Until then, however, she relied on the invisibility granted to her by the heavily Shaped Cloak of Nuun she had created. She had had the cloak for a while but she had never really had a reason to risk its use. That was before she had been assigned to work on an alien vessel that was obviously not of Yuuzhan Vong creation. Before she connected the vessel to the possibility that Ekh'm Val had discovered Zonama Sekot. Before she received a coded message from a heretic faction on Yuuzhan'tar in response to her very covert inquiries.

She moved quickly, stealthily, down a ramp and then through the winding side-streets. All around her, she continued to see evidence of a planet returning to its natural state, of being cleansed. The streets were nothing but dirt and dissolved rock now, flanked not by towering buildings but by lim trees slowly growing out of the remains of skyscrapers. Bioluminescent orbs glowed in place of the streets signs

and lights coming from the destroyed structures. And a soft padding of moss covered what stone that did manage to survive.
Down another ramp. Across a coral walkway to replace a destroyed metal one. And in a clearing that had once been a military spaceport—leveled and Shaped for the better part of the past year—she came to the spindly structure of the primary temple to Yun-Yammka, the god of warriors and war. Nen Yim found herself in a vast courtyard. Statues of Yun-Yammka and warriors of great renown lined the walkway up to the temple, all made of the long bones and skulls, and given life by shorn and carefully preserved skin, of defeated enemies. Large blazers burned in front of the statues, somehow emphasizing their greatness and towering size. Two drain-like furrows had been created along either side of the walkway, where a never-ending stream of blood flowed down out from the temple. A liktha buried beneath the ground then recycled the blood to continue the perpetual sacrifice to the great god. Only a couple of lengths away from the statues, on either side, the pathway dropped off into a deep, dark pit where the bodies of the sacrificed were tossed after the ceremony.
Unlike the temple of Yun-Harla, which had a forever-droning chorus of p'hiili and ngom, the only time the temple of Yun-Yammka would be inundated with any such a cacophony was during the sacrifices of the prisoners; their screams providing a wholly different sort of music. But it was quiet now, almost deathly so. Most of the warriors already off fighting, most of the prisoners taken during the fall of the planet already sacrificed…or freed. There did not seem to be a single soul present at the temple, save for the Shamed caretakers who labored continuously with the hopes of one day being extolled for their devotion.
Wary of a trap, Nen Yim slowly and carefully made her way down the walkway. And then she saw the figure she was supposed to meet. There was no mistaking his outline, even in the faint line provided by the blazers. Muscular, but in soft robes of a priest. Wielding an amphistaff in one hand, but an amulet to Yun-Yammka in the other. His eyes glittered with intelligence, there was a definite purpose in them. His defining feature, however, was an acquired one. A vivid brand that stretched diagonally across his face, the result of a blast bug exploding close by during the disruptions of one of the many sacrificial ceremonies by the Freed Ones. This left one of his eyes completely blackened and the other his natural reddish orange. The irony of meeting him after all this time was so great Nen Yim nearly laughed deliriously. She watched him for a moment, then ducked aside to remove her cloak.

Stepping out again, she caught his attention. "The gods have an interesting sense of humor, priest."
"Master Shaper Yim," the priest said evenly. "A shaper so favored by the gods, by Shimrra, yet unknown to all others."
"High Priest Naazar, slave to the whims of Shimrra and worshipper of a god that could care less about his supplicants. Although, come to think of it, the two may be one and the same," Nen Yim said in rejoinder Naazar's expression tightened. "That is one skill you must work on, my dear master shaper, when to whisper and when to remain silent."
"Had you wanted me dead, or in your torture chambers, we would not be having this conversation," Nen Yim deduced. "You have obviously had a…change of heart…since we last met. Now, both our times are limited. We can either go on pretending to know nothing about the other or get to the purpose of this meeting."
"Clearly you are willing to risk a fate worse than death by simply coming here," Naazar said. "But I can also guess your reason as told to me by Ekh'm Val."
Nen Yim hid any sign of her surprise under Naazar's watchful gaze. Yet, her face must have betrayed something, because the High Priest nodded. "It is as I surmised then. Who better to work on a craft from Zonama Sekot than the one shaper beloved by Shimrra and the gods."
"Then you understand the implications," Nen Yim said carefully, grateful that she did not have to waste time explaining a rather burdensome and long tale.
"I do, though I am sure others will be revealed in time."
"And you will help?"
"So you would have me smuggle you from beneath Shimrra's nose, equip you with a ship—"
"I can supply my own ship."
"So I simply have to smuggle you out, outfit you, and help you find this planet—which Shimrra claims is destroyed but Ekh'm Val says otherwise," Naazar surmised with a twisted smirk.
"That is what I desire, yes."
"It is a good thing the mandate Nom Anor had foisted upon me gives me leave of this planet to seek out heretics from afar then, don't you think?"
"You have not answered my question, will you help?"
"I am sure you are aware of a certain heretical movement on this planet."
"I am sure my knowledge of it pales in comparison to what you know."
"Indeed. If you truly wish to find Zonama Sekot, however, you will have to meet the leader of this heretic movement."

"A Jedi?"
"No, a Yuuzhan Vong who calls himself the Prophet."
"Another predator wearing the guise of the prey."
"Perhaps, but he commands a great loyalty and an army of many. We have also confirmed that he has invited a Jedi to the planet for the very purpose of seeking out Zonama Sekot based on the directions of Ekh'm Val. Up until recently, we have been lacking a ship."
"And I have a ship."
"And you have a ship," Naazar nodded. "I am as curious as you are about this mysterious planet."
"You wish me to ally with heretics?"
"How is that any different than the work you Shape?" Naazar said, being only one of a few individuals who knew she was Shaping the next cortex for Shimrra. "Apart from that, you know not where this world is. The Prophet does. We have no ship. You do. An alliance, no matter how temporary, will be beneficial for the both of us, don't you think?"
Nen Yim tried to discern his motives, but Naazar's face remained like a stone. Slowly, she nodded. "I agree."
"The Jedi is due to arrive sometime tomorrow. You will have that long to set your affairs in order. Take this villip. We will signal you when the time is right."
Nen Yim inclined her head briefly, somehow feeling that she had just signed her own death warrant. Yet, there was very little she could do. She was dead if she stayed anyways, would be passing up the one opportunity she had to truly save her people. Even if she had to work with heretics, it wasn't like she was any different, like the Supreme Overlord was any different. The future of the Yuuzhan Vong lay in this Zonama Sekot, and she was going to make sure that future was a bright one.

0-[VII]-0 0-[VII]-0

"So this is the Far Distance, huh?"
"It's definitely far away from the Ferroan colonies," Jacen agreed with his twin as they and his younger brother gazed about the new continent. Technically they were there to scout out more potential locations where the Yuuzhan Vong could settle, but they also had another task to accomplish.
"Many of the Ferroans are curious as to how the seed-partners will react to the three of you," Magister Jabitha said with a smile. "Your grandfather managed to attract fifteen of them."
"I take it that's unusual?" Anakin tilted his head.

"Very," Jabitha nodded. "In the times before the Crossings, most visitors were only capable of attracting three seed-partners. During the Crossings, this area suffered tremendous upheaval, and the geography of the area changed greatly. After the Crossings, this grove has had no other visitors besides myself and those chosen by Sekot."
"And these…seed-partners," Jacen said slowly. "A ship will be grown from them?"
"Yes," Jabitha said. "However, the ship will quickly fall ill and die if it is too far away from Zonama Sekot for too long."
"Local travel only," Jaina said. "I guess you'll be taking care of our ships when you stay here, Little Brother."
"Not a problem," Anakin laughed. He looked back to the Magistrate. "How do we do this?"
"Unlike the enclosed chambers of the past, the seed-partners are free-grown in that grove. Approach the center of the grove and be as still as you can. The seed-partners will float down and choose you."
"Go on, Jaina," Jacen gestured to his sister. "I know you want to fly one of Sekot's ships, both Anakin and I can see that insane gleam in your eyes."
"Har har, Jace," Jaina said sarcastically.
Yet she didn't deny the accusation and eagerly stepped into the grove. A gentle rush of wind swept through and sent a flurry of seed-partners twirling about into the air. The wind subsided, and the seed-partners began an almost sentient fluttering dance around Jaina. Jaina followed the movements of the small spiky seeds with great curiosity. She could feel them in the Force, bright specks of life full of potential. If she closed her eyes and just reached out, it was as if she was surrounded by a cascade of falling light. She felt several pinpricks as the dancing specks of light came into contact with her skin. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it wasn't painful either. After a few seconds, the wind rushed through the grove again, and a majority of the seed-partners fluttered away.
"Nine, nice going, Jaya," Anakin said brightly.
"Thanks, I think," Jaina tried tugging at one of the seed-partners that had attached itself to her opposite hand, but it wouldn't detach itself. She tried one that had adhered itself to the side of her face, but achieved the same results. "Errr…these things *do* come off right? They don't grow into a ship while still attached to me?"
Jabitha chuckled merrily. "They come off. In another day or two, you'll feel the bond with you fully cement itself. We will then remove them and take you to the forging pits and shaping warehouse to help you create the ship you desire."

"So I have to go the next two days looking like a walking cactus?"
"How do you think your grandfather felt with thirteen of them?" Jabitha smiled.
"I guess I'll survive," Jaina laughed.
"You three are in a ways fortunate that Sekot has decided to give you these ships free of charge. In the days of my father, several billion credits were spent just for the opportunity to bond with seed-partners."
"Wow," Jacen whistled.
"Sekot wanted to make sure her children were in good hands," Jabitha nodded.
"Well, go ahead Jace," Anakin gestured to his older brother. "Let's see how many seed-partners you can bond to."
Jacen entered the grove and the winds picked up again.
"Is that Sekot?" Jaina whispered to the Magister.
"Yes, Sekot has taken a more active role in the creation of her children since the Crossings. We have discovered that this gives her a stronger connection to any ship created and allows Sekot to better control them for the purposes of defending this planet."
When the entire bonding ceremony with Jacen was completed, he emerged with eleven partners.
"You're up, Anakin," Jacen motioned.
Anakin smiled and ducked into the tree-lined grove. It was humming with Force-energy and despite being on Zonama for the past month, everything felt even more alive than before. It was as if every breath he took was pure Force energy instead of air. He exhaled shakily and made his way to the center. The moment he did, the wind rushed through the grove and an innumerable number of seeds in the trees and on the ground, were swept up into the air. Like a swirling vortex, they surrounded him. They brushed against him, fluttered away. Adhered loosely, only to be swept away by the wind once more. While they danced about his form, Anakin silently implemented an idea that had come to him while watching his siblings. As quick as the ceremony had started, it was over.
Anakin curiously glanced at his hands and bare arms. Then shrugged and walked out of the grove.
"Anakin?" Jaina looked confused at the sight of him.
"I guess none of them wanted me," Anakin said lightly, sounding oddly cheerful.
"You don't have *any* seed-partners?" Jacen blinked in shock.
"Not unless I have something stuck to my back that I don't know of," Anakin said. "It's alright Jacen. I guess this shows I'm not as similar to Anakin Skywalker as some might think."

"Strange," Jabitha said, even she seemed surprised. "In all the bonding ceremonies of recent years, never has anyone come away with no partners. Even the least compatible had at least one. It is a shame that Sekot now allows only one bonding ceremony per year, otherwise I would recommend you try it again."
"What can I say, they didn't like me," Anakin sighed. He glanced at his older siblings. "I'm slightly envious of the two of you. You get to have your own custom made ships."
"Maybe if you try again…" Jaina started, but stopped when Anakin shook his head.
"Jaya."
Jaina looked frustrated, Jacen looked dumbstruck, and Jabitha was staring at Anakin as if seeing him in a new light.
It was the Magister who spoke first, her golden eyes glimmering with wisdom. "You became like the Far Outsiders, didn't you?"
At that, both Jaina and Jacen looked to their brother in surprise.
"Anakin?"
"I was testing a theory," Anakin nodded. "And I'm glad it was disproven."
"Theory?"
"I was worried that Zonama's natural life might be incompatible with anything the Yuuzhan Vong bring. I mean, we *will* be transplanting their entire culture, all of their wildlife, onto this planet. The last thing we want is for one to completely wipe out the other or to seriously damage the eco-system of both sides."
"What did you find out and how come we couldn't detect your shifts into Vongphase?" Jacen frowned.
"Well I found out that the seed-partners can enter Vongphase as well," Anakin smiled, his relief clear. "When they thought they were bonding to a Yuuzhan Vong, they adhered themselves to me and entered Vongphase. When I returned back to my normal Force presence, the seeds detached because I was no longer the person they bonded too. I switched back and forth so rapidly, I doubt you would have detected it unless you were actually looking for it."
"So Zonama Sekot is compatible with Yuuzhan Vong life?" Jaina asked.
"As far as this test goes, yes. Of course we won't know for sure until Taan and her people begin to settle here, but at least I feel a bit more reassured about it. It might also explain why the Yuuzhan Vong are so similar, yet different to the life on Zonama."
"You think that the original seed-planet came into contact with something that made it change its presence in the Force?" Jacen said intuitively.

"It might have been hiding from something or someone," Anakin nodded. "And a millennia or so later, here we are."
Jacen nodded. "It also proves that the same genes found in Yuuzhan Vong life, the ones that probably make them out of sync with the Force, also exist in life on Zonama."
"But what about that heretical legend you told us about?" Jaina said. "The one where the Yuuzhan Vong's loss of Force was due to some type of virus their scouts picked up from this system?"
"There's problem with that story, though," Jacen said. "One that had me confused until Anakin's little experiment just now. Unless their space-faring society was completely inept at biological sciences and the notion of quarantine, the crew of single scout ship couldn't have possibly caused an entire species-wide, undetectable pandemic. That's where the seed-partners fill in the missing piece of the puzzle."
"If the Yuuzhan Vong home world was anything like Zonama Sekot, it would have been able to quickly adapt to whatever living organisms it came across," Anakin agreed. "It's just a guess, and since it happened several hundred thousand years ago there's no way to be sure, but once their original Yuuzhan'tar got a read on those infected with the virus, it was able to replicate the changes on a vast scale. With the knowledge of the virus stored, it could have used it at any time it wanted."
"Like a threat from Force sensitives," Jaina commented.
"Exactly," Jacen said, briefly checking with his brother. "The panic described in the story highlights political and social unrest. Now, that panic could have been caused by the loss of Force sensitivity, or something threatening their way of life. Like how the Ferroans nearly had their civilization fall apart during the Crossings, the early Yuuzhan Vong might have faced some sort of similar difficulty and the truth got mixed up after so many thousands of years of oral transmission."
"Of course this all depends on whether or not the original Yuuzhan'tar *had* the ability to implement a change in the genetic structure of those living on it," Anakin said with a shrug. "And we can't exactly go and ask it now.
"We may not have Yuuzhan'tar, but there *is* one way to test your theory, brothers," Jaina said, gesturing to the wilderness around her and then calling out to the breeze. "Sekot! You've absorbed the remains of the attacking Yuuzhan Vong vessels and felt the shift of the seed-partners into Vongphase. Do you think you can recreate a sapling or something with the same Force presence?"
There was a very long pause, and then a small swirl of twigs and dust announced the arrival of the planet's personality. Sekot formed itself in

the image of Jabtiha's father, a puzzled expression on his face. "It is strange, I can theoretically create the seed in the manner which you describe, but I would not be able make it grow beyond its natural ability to do so."
"But it is possible?" Jaina asked.
Sekot inclined his head. "Yes."
"Your abilities seem to be along the same lines as our own," Jacen said thoughtfully. "We can sense, and mimic, but can't use the Force to affect things with Yuuzhan Vong presences. Since most of the plants and animals here are bolstered with the Force and thus within your ability to manipulate, I'm not surprise a Vong-seed would remain in its neutral state. I wonder how the original Yuuzhan'tar managed to implement the change on such a vast scale if it couldn't use the Force to speed things along."
"So what does that mean for the Yuuzhan Vong?" Jaina asked.
"I am not sure," Sekot admitted. "Perhaps I need more time to get to know them and their technologies. Perhaps they are too different than they seed from which they had come. Until more of the Far Outsiders arrive, I cannot form a clear opinion."
"Are you ready to start being the home to some of the more peaceful Yuuzhan Vong?" Jacen said.
"I am," Sekot consented.
"Then we can use a villip to signal Taan and begin the first wave of settlement."
Sekot smiled serenely and slowly began to dissolve back into a swirl of twigs and dirt. "I look forward to having them over. After all this time, it will be like long lost children finally returning home."
0-[Chapter End]-0
A\N: Wednesday like usual for next update.

ADA 55

Fifty-Five
0-[I]-0 0-[I]-0
By mimicking one of the hundreds of pieces of debris that would occasionally burn up in Coruscant's atmosphere, the scout ship of Garagh Jamaane was able to deftly avoid the security patrols and atmospheric fliers that patrolled the skies of the Shaped planet. By mimicking one of the hundreds of pieces of debris, they also had to avoid stopping at any point in their descent and the scout ship was also forced to make a very hard landing into the Western Sea.

Some sort of inflatable bladder-like creature was then used as a small raft to ferry the crew of the scout ship, and Tahiri and Shaeri, to the shore.
"My second trip to Coruscant, and again I'm crash-landing in a Yuuzhan Vong ship," Tahiri muttered, glancing over her shoulder at the rapidly sinking scout ship. "I need to find a better travel agency."
"It was the only way," Garagh said stiffly. "We would have been detected if..."
"Sarcasm, Garagh," Tahiri sighed. "That was sarcasm."
Garagh blinked.
"No sarcasm among the elite of Shimrra?"
"No."
"You guys are no fun," Tahiri grumbled, looking back towards the shoreline. "How far is it until we reach the Prophet?"
"Not far," Garagh answered.
Garagh hadn't been exaggerating. Only two blocks from the shore they had landed on was structure partially sunken into the ground. It was an organic building, like most Yuuzhan Vong buildings were, but sheets of metal covered it, as if they had been pulled into place to provide some sort of camouflage.
Tahiri glanced at Garagh with a raised eyebrow. "The Prophet is in here?"
"This is but one of many of our safe-houses," Garagh nodded. He reached out and stroked the nodule by the door. It trilled and the door slid open.
Tahiri's hand reflexively went for her lightsaber when one of the biggest warriors she had ever seen stepped up and out of the compound. The warrior was large and scarred, and had two equally large coufee strapped to his back.
"Stay your weapon," Garagh said quickly.
Though Tahiri was far from reassured, she refrained from activating her lightsaber. Shaeri likewise slowly lowered her amphistaff as she eyed the large warrior distrustfully.
"Kunra," Garagh began by way of introduction. "Is one of the Prophet's other bodyguards. We have pledged our lives to defend him. You are in no danger unless you mean the Prophet harm. Kunra, this is the Avatar of Yun-Shuno and her...friend, Shaeri Jamaane."
"Welcome," Kunra motioned to the door. "The Prophet is most eager to meet with you, One-Who-Was-Shaped. You have been expected for some time."
Tahiri nodded curtly. "I am interested in meeting with him as well."

Carefully, Tahiri and Shaeri entered the semi-submerged dwelling. To their surprise, the 'safe-house' was more a 'safe-mansion.' The interior of the structure was a lot larger and roomier than the outside suggested. And within were all sorts of activities. A corner of the building was being used to grow crops. Another, to teach Shamed Ones how to use makeshift clubs and other weapons. There were even school lessons being provided on a lower level, with Yuuzhan Vong children learning about the 'greatness of the *Jeedai'* and the word of the Prophet.

"The Prophet cares for us all," Kunra said, his voice full of pride and admiration. "He gives us refuge from the harsh toils most of us face. A retreat away from the whip and labors wielded by those of higher social standing. We live only for Him, for the Truth he spreads. His words give us courage, his soul is our guiding light."

Tahiri simply nodded, glancing back and forth between Garagh and Kunra. The more she heard from the followers of this 'Prophet,' the less and less she liked. It was as if some priest or Intendant caste had decided to take advantage of the Freed One movement and subvert the fanatic desire to be redeemed, for their own purposes.

"We continue to toil until the *Jeedai* deliver us from our shame," a Shamed One nearby spoke. "Until the *Jeedai* decide that we are worthy, we will struggle to prove our worth."

"We are all unworthy of the guidance of the Prophet, yet he is kind enough to share it with us," a Yuuzhan Vong wearing clothing denoting his occupation as a low-ranking Intendant caste member added.

"That is because you are all my children," a benevolent voice called out.

Cries of "Yu'shaa!" filled the air, and some of those gathered in the room bowed down low.

A tall figure entered the room, using a walking stick and supported by two more aides. Children flocked to his side in glee, and he affectionately brushed a hand across their foreheads. Despite his preeminent position, the clothing he wore was nothing but rags. Gnarled, work-roughened hands gripped the top of the metal and coral cane. And his posture was slightly stooped over. As Tahiri looked to the man's heavily scarred face, she realized with raised eyebrows that the man was wearing an ooglith masquer.

"You are the Prophet Yu'shaa?" Tahiri asked.

"I am. It is my greatest honor to meet the Avatar of Yun-Shuno and redeemer of the Shamed. There is not a Shamed One alive who does not know the name of Tahiri Kwaad, She-Who-Was-Shaped. You are the reason why this shelter has been so successful."

"Me?"
"Yes, if it were not for the Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement, many would not have any hope. But with the success of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, many more are open to the Truth," Yu'shaa said benevolently. "And now that you have arrived this day has truly become a blessed day."
"And everyone follows you because you promise to lead them to this redemption they all seek?" Tahiri gestured to the nearly hundred or so individuals around them.
"Oh no, they follow me because of the visions granted to me by the gods. For I myself am not a key to redemption, to the future, I am merely a fellow seeker, like all the others. I, however, have been blessed by the gods the ability to *see* those enlightened days. Days where all Yuuzhan Vong stand united, as equals."
"It sounds as if you have all the support you need," Tahiri said. "Why did you need me to come here too?"
"As I have said, I am not a leader, or an adventurer, I humbly seek the same redemption sought by all Shamed Ones. You, however, have Yun-Shuno's favor. You raised an army out of the pitiful, made the weak strong, and shook the very foundations of Shimrra's throne."
"The one who informed us about Zonama Sekot, Ekh'm Val, was killed in one of Shimrra's raids on another of our safe-houses," Garagh elaborated. "Only Ekh'm knew the exact location of Zonama, and he left no instructions other than that we should look to the Outer Rim."
"So, you'll provide the ship and crew, and Shaeri and I will provide the location?" Tahiri concluded.
The Prophet bowed his head. "You are indeed wise."
"I have an alternative idea," Tahiri said. "The Freed Yuuzhan Vong are going to be making their first landings on Zonama. Why don't you use what ships you have and join up with them?"
"No!" The Prophet blurted unexpectedly. He quickly composed himself, shaking his head. "There is a reason why my disciples have not joined the Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement. While we both wish Shimrra gone, their ideals and our own differ to the extent that they are incompatible. There is also much animosity towards the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, since they live a life of luxury while all of us here on Yuuzhan'tar wallow in filth and despair. It would be better if our groups did not meet."
"Oh," Tahiri nodded slowly. "So you intend to bring a great many of your followers with us?"
The Prophet blinked owlishly, realizing that most of the people in the room were looking to him for an answer. "Were that were possible, I would, Jedi Kwaad. But the ship we have is but a small vessel, capable of holding only a half-dozen individuals at most. There will be a great

pilgrimage for the faithful when this war is over, and they will all be redeemed. They have waited this long and know that redemption is near. With you present, I foresee that their faith will be rewarded in due time."
"Then if it's just us and a few others, in a single ship. Wouldn't it be safer to travel to Zonama Sekot in a convoy of Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessels? You represent the hope of hundreds. Despite your differences with the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, I would think your followers would want your journey to be as safe and secure as possible." Tahiri watched the Prophet carefully, taking note of the way his eyes tightened ever so slightly. She didn't trust the Prophet in the slightest. The same doctrines his 'disciples' were spouting sounded an awfully like a reworked version of the lies Shimrra's priests were known to spew. The fact that the Prophet also kept his face hidden by an ooglith masquer didn't win him any points either.
The Prophet's face split into a grin as he bowed his head in concession. "You are of course right, Avatar of Yun-Shuno. If you believe it is in the best interest of all of us to travel to Zonama Sekot with the Freed Ones, then that is what we must do. I look forward to meeting the brave leaders of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong and commending them on their success thus far."
"Then we should leave now."
"There is a small problem," the Prophet said. "Another member who has yet to join us consequentially has the ship we will be using."
"Oh? And who is this member?"
"A shaper," Yu'shaa said with a shrug. "The Master Shaper assigned to work on the alien vessel acquired by Ekh'm Val during his trip to Zonama Sekot. It is that vessel we will be using."
"So you, Shaeri, me, this shaper. Who else?" Tahiri said.
"Garagh will of course come, as will Kunra," the Prophet motioned to his two bodyguards. "And there is one other."
"Only one?"
"The Prophet is referring to me," a deep and throaty voice, full of strength and dignity, answered.
From out of the shadows, Tahiri saw a Yuuzhan Vong in the robes of a High Priest emerge. This time Tahiri couldn't stop her surprise from showing. She had thought the Prophet a manipulator of the downtrodden, using them for his own ends. But the presence of a High Priest changed things. What could the Prophet have offered the High Priest to cause such a high-ranking official in Shimrra's government to turn his back on everything his status would have granted him?

"A High Priest?" Tahiri said, taking note of the partially healed burn on the imposing priest's face.
The priest crossed his arms in front of his chest and bowed politely. "I am High Priest Naazar, devotee of the fearsome god Yun-Yammka."
Now Tahiri was more than stunned. She knew that this was the man who had led the Yuuzhan Vong fleet against Hapes. Knew from intelligence reports that he was the one responsible for rooting out Freed One agents throughout Coruscant and Yuuzhan Vong-held systems. And to think he now counted himself among the very people he was sworn to hunt down? Tahiri stared down the large priest. "Tell me, High Priest, what has the Prophet offered you to cause you abandon your position and come with us?"
"He offers me nothing but the Truth," Naazar answered smoothly. "I have had my eyes open and know that the gods worshipped by Shimrra's priests are nothing but lies. I wish to bring about the end of this war and give my people a chance to experience this truth for themselves."
"You think the future of your people lies in the hands of the Jedi?"
Naazar nodded. "I do. It is the *Jeedai* who convinced your Galactic Alliance Senate not to push for a full military victory. It is the *Jeedai* who have taken the time and effort to seek out Zonama Sekot and ensure a stable Yuuzhan Vong society once the war is over. And it is the *Jeedai* who will guide us, aid us in our quest to become self-reliant."
Tahiri took what the man had to say with a slow nod, and then looked to the Prophet. "And where is this shaper with the ship you mentioned?"
Yu'shaa grimaced and humbly bowed his head. "That is the only problem we have. The shaper, and the ship, both reside in the Supreme Overlord's grasp, tucked away within his palace of the dim night; for that is what his abode is until the great dawn breaks again. To escape this planet, we will need to infiltrate this palace and liberate both shaper and ship."
"Oh?" Tahiri raised an eyebrow.
"It is the only way," Yu'shaa said regretfully.
"And I suppose you have a plan for this as well?"
"I do," Yu'shaa acknowledged. "Though Shimrra has banished all but the highest ranking members of society from the compound, I still have my agents in place. Tomorrow night, there will be a great ceremony taking place to honor Yun-Yuuzhan and Yun-Yammka for the resounding victories at Fondor and at Ralltiir. The Supreme Overlord will be at the temple of Yun-Yuuzhan to personally oversee the ceremonies."

"Victories?" Shaeri spoke up.
The Prophet tilted his head in her direction. "Apparently Nas Choka was successfully able to lead a fleet and destroy your Admiral Kre'fey's forces, while Zhat Lah defeated the great General Antilles in battle. If the information we have learned is true, your Admiral Kre'fey was killed in the fighting."
Tahiri's mind immediately went to Zindra and the other members of Barefoot squadron, whom she knew had been under Kre'fey's command. Had they survived? Or had they become just another set of casualties in this kriffing war? She kept her face impassive though, not wanting to give anything away.
Seeing the Prophet's intuitive gaze studying her, Tahiri scowled. "So we'll be using the ceremonies as cover?
"Yes, so rest now. Tomorrow, under the cover of darkness, and with the ceremonies emptying the Supreme One's palace, we shall steal both ship and the shaper. Tomorrow we shall began our holy trek to Zonama Sekot."
0-[II]-0 0-[II]-0
Tekli rubbed at her eyes tiredly. As a member of the Chadra-Fan race, people often mistook her small and relatively unimposing figure for weakness, assumed her to be timid and fearful of battle—even more so since she was known more for her healing abilities than her skill with the lightsaber. Yet weak and timid was far from who she was. She had earned her rank as a Jedi Knight in the new Jedi Order. She had fearlessly accompanied Anakin Solo to Myrkr, even played a pivotal role in keeping him and Tesar Sebatyne alive. She knew almost as much about Yuuzhan Vong biots as their shapers, and was in the process of creating several healing techniques that merged Jedi knowledge with the creatures the Yuuzhan Vong used in their healing. And now, as she relieved Jedi Master Madurrin so the Anx could get some much needed rest, Tekli was the commander of what was left of Admiral Kre'fey and the Tion Hegemony's battered fleet. Humans, Wookies, and other much larger species all looked to her now to keep them alive.
Tekli sighed, *and I thought that Anakin had had it rough*. He only had to deal with a taskforce of a little over a dozen Jedi on Myrkr. *She*, on the other hand, had several thousand lives now dependent on her decisions.
She glanced about the secondary bridge of the Galactic Alliance Star Destroyer, *Fate's Chosen.* An ironic name considering that the *Fate's Chosen* was the only Star Destroyer in the fleet still remotely in fighting condition. Even that was saying something. Its main engines

had been taken out by suicidal coralskipper runs, forcing them to pilot the ship on the secondary Gemon-4 ion drives. The bridge tower, and almost all of the senior crew within it were gone; one of the last casualties of the fighting retreat Kre'fey's forces had tried to mount. And the ship's hangar bay was not in any shape to launch the single squadron of fighters that had survived. It had been a miracle that it had even managed to make the jump to hyperspace all the way to Taanab.

The mood in the room was completely somber, as the demoralized crew tried to continue their duties.

"Anything on our scanners?" Tekli said with a soft gentleness, weaving a soothing calm into her words.

"No, ma'am," The sensor operator shook his head. "Probes reporting no gravimetric distortions indicative of the micro-jumps employed by the Vong."

"Thank you, corporal," Tekli looked to another officer, the XO of the vessel. "Status on the repairs to the *Mon Adapyne*?"

The young-looking Zabrak lieutenant swallowed and read off her datapad. "Crews have finished scrapping the *Desolation* and *Maverick*, with all our engineers working around the clock, the *Mon Adapyne* should be in battle condition in two days' time."

"Just in time for the anticipated Yuuzhan Vong attack," one of the other bridge crew whispered in a hushed voice.

A despair-filled silence filled the bridge.

"Ma'am," another officer whispered. "Please be honest with us, do you really think we'll survive the coming engagement?"

Tekli closed her eyes for a moment, visibly letting her guard down so that they would know she had nothing to hide. "If I am honest, there is a very good chance we will die in that battle. Just as there is a chance we will die in any battle within this war. The Force saw fit to spare our lives when our friends and comrades in the other vessels perished. What we must do is show the Force, show our friends and comrades who died, that we are worthy of the time we have been given. When the Yuuzhan Vong finally do come out here to engage us, we will not run, nor shall we throw ourselves foolhardily at them. We will use our minds, our skills, our trust in each other, and I promise you that I will do my best to ensure that as many of you survive as possibly can."

"Thank you, ma'am," the junior officer murmured, head down.

"All of you are brave," Tekli said gently. "You may or may not think this, but you are. And when the time comes, that bravery will show itself as you protect your friends and your fellow soldiers with everything you have."

"Speaking from experience, ma'am?" The black-skinned Zabrak said.
"Yes," Tekli smiled faintly, her snout twitching. "When I was with Anakin on Myrkr, fear nearly paralyzed me to the point of inaction. Outnumbered, stranded on a foreign, enemy-held world, with my friends dying left and right, who wouldn't be? But, in the heat of that battle, I made a decision. I was not going to lose anyone else if I could help it. Before that mission, I never thought of myself as brave or heroic in any sense. I still don't think it. But Myrkr showed me what I would do in the most desperate of situations. If we work together, put all of our energy into ensuring the others will survive, then there is a strong likelihood that we too will make it through these next few days as well."
A control panel began to beep, and the operator quickly looked down at it. "Ma'am, a fleet is emerging from hyperspace off our port side! It's a large one!"
Tekli was about to let loose her first few orders when she felt an unmistakable presence in the Force. The tension left her body almost immediately.
"Stand down, they're friendly. Open a channel to the lead vessel."
"Yes, ma'am."
Delirious happiness was clear on Tekli's face as the holopad glowed to life. "Greetings, Queen Mother, what brings you to this part of the galaxy?"
"We were in the neighborhood and received word that you needed assistance," the hologram of Tenel Ka flickered slightly as the burnt-out holopad tried to keep her image. The red-haired young woman frowned at something on her end and her eyebrows rose in concern. *"My friend, we must be receiving faulty readings. Our sensors are saying that you are transmitting from a burning wreck of a Star Destroyer?"*
Tekli grimaced. "Your sensors are not wrong, that burning wreck is us."
Tenel Ka hid her surprise and alarm well. *"Then it is a good thing we stopped by. Have your crews stand down and take a break for the time being, the First and Second Royal Fleets shall take over while your people catch up on some much deserved rest. We shall dispatch shuttles with medical supplies and the like, please coordinate with Jana as to where we should send them."*
"As you command, Queen Mother," Tekli said, bowing her head solemnly. "Thank you."
"It is good to see that you have survived, Tekli," Tenel Ka said, dropping out of character for a fraction of a moment, her grey eyes

reflecting her relief. *"If you have the time, would you be willing to transfer to this ship to debrief us?"*
"I will, and it is good to see you again too, Tenel Ka," Tekli glanced over the shoulder of one of the bridge-crew, then blinked. "But how did you manage to come by so many ships? With the number you have with you, added to the fleet under Dukat Gray, that's many more ships than what I remember seeing the last time I was at Hapes."
"We will inform you when you arrive. For now, let's just say that the deal Hapes has with the Hutts is proving to be very profitable for all parties involved."
"That sounds like an interesting story indeed," Tekli emitted a chittering laugh, the first time she had felt amusement in a long while. "Very well, I will see you aboard, Queen Mother. We have much to catch up on."
0-[III]-0 0-[III]-0
With great apprehension, Jysella watched the squadrons of Yuuzhan Vong patrol the streets below. The footfalls of their great, horned mounts rumbled loudly on the paved road in a methodical, intimidating thumping. She pulled back from the window and let out a breath, her heart racing in her chest. With her father on the opposite side of the world and a Vong occupying force conducting random sweeps through the city, she didn't really like her odds.
And she was on 'never tell me the odds' Corellia, so that was saying something.
If anyone asked her, she would definitely admit that she was scared at the moment. What twelve-going-on-thirteen year old girl wouldn't be when being caught meant an instant promise of a very torturous death? Jedi or no, she couldn't stop herself from shivering as she hugged herself. The Yuuzhan Vong were bits of wrongness in the Force, a deafening and frightening silence where the normal tunes of life should have been. Ever since Alema had opened her ears and eyes to the wondrous music that was the Force, Jysella had taken every opportunity she could to immerse herself in it, to dance with the rhythms around her. But with the Yuuzhan Vong, there was nothing. No life, only a cold, cold, stillness.
She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling her heart pound. The two scars she bore from her foolishness on Mandalore began aching, and she involuntarily jerked as her body recalled the searing pain of two amphistaffs piercing into her. She could remember the almost feral snarls as the Yuuzhan Vong breathed his foul breath into her stunned face as she toppled over. Could recall the sheer fear she felt, the thought that she truly was going to die. And as those memories

combined with her present situation, she couldn't help but whimper and hug her legs.
She wanted Valin, her mom and dad, her friends. To be anywhere but where she was now.
"You'll be safe here, you know that, right?"
Jysella weakly tilted her head up towards the speaker, one of the only reasons why she was still alive. She had actually been using his family's shuttle service when Thrackan decided to change sides. Fortunately, the members of DonoSlane Enterprises had no love for the Diktat and had taken her in.
She didn't know what she would have done if they hadn't.
"New experience, being surrounded by Vong like this. At least in open battle I didn't have to hide." She absently reached for her shoulder, where she carried the scar she had received left over from an amphistaff wound on Mandalore. She tried to sound braver than she felt, but her voice began breaking almost immediately. "Also had lots of friends to look out for me. I'm all alone here at the moment."
"Not alone," the young teen, a year older than her said with a warming smile. He handed her a cup of hot chocolate. "You have me, mom and dad, and Kolot and Danny."
The thumping footsteps of the Yuuzhan Vong mounts stopped just outside the DonoSlane hangar and Jysella shrunk back again, once again hugging her legs and trembling. It was absurd. She was on Corellia, her home planet. She was supposed to be safe.
But as she was rapidly learning, there was no such thing as safe in the middle of a war.
The voice of the patrol leader called out demandingly. *"I am Sub-Commander Tavik Lah, you will open your doors and ready yourselves for inspection. If you are caught harboring fugitives, you will all die."*
"How original," Tarc said, rolling his eyes. He didn't seem at all worried about the band of thugs at the door. "Like I said, don't worry. My parents got this."
Jysella glanced through the small crack in the floorboards and watched Tarc's mother open the hangar doorway.
"Sub-Commander, welcome. The resources of DonoSlane Enterprises are at the disposal of you and your noble domain," Kirney Slane bowed low. *"You are free to search our humble business, I am sure that the Diktat has told you that we have always been loyal to him and his Peace Brigade friends."*
"Admitting to being friends with those useless gods-forsaken Peace Brigaders is <u>not</u> a good thing, infidel."

Jysella pulled back, closing her eyes and doing her best to control her breathing as the sounds of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors filled the hangar below her. Shelves were over turn, items were destroyed, and she flinched at every guttural yell. She felt Tarc take a seat next to her, and then jerked in surprise when he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.
She gave him one long look before hugging him tightly, shaking against him as the snarls and alien language echoed through the DonoSlane hangar.
"It's alright," Tarc whispered, his voice becoming something to which she could anchor herself too. "It'll be okay. We won't let anything happen to you. I promise."
Jysella let out a whimpering sob, too scared to be embarrassed. Heavy footsteps made their way up the landing outside the attic space, and Jysella completely froze, panting with wide eyes.
The door was kicked open violently, and Jysella flinched in terror, her grip on Tarc growing even tighter.
"*What is it*?" A guttural voice snarled from below.
"Two infidel children, sub-commander." A warrior, standing in the doorway, called back.
To Jysella's complete surprise, Tarc stood and stepped protectively in front of her. She hugged herself again, looking at the older teen with wide-eyes filled with terror. "Do you two mind, you're scaring my girlfriend!"
"You dare!" The doorway warrior yelled. "We are Yuuzhan Vong. Your Diktat has given us permission to do as we please!"
"Then go do as you please elsewhere," Tarc said, tilting his head upwards. "I'm sure your sub-commander will love to hear how well you excel at beating up frightened children. That has to be all your domain is good at if you got assigned to this search team."
The warrior took a step forward and glowered down at the young human child who just barely came up to his chest. Reaching out, he gripped a fist-full of Tarc's shirt. "You best hold your tongue. We have been tasked with finding Galactic Alliance sympathizers, you are sounding dangerously like one."
"I couldn't care less about the GA," Tarc said, standing his ground, even if his feet were now off it. "Now are you done blustering or do you have some other child-scaring technique in your bag of grumpiness?"
Behind the warrior, one of the others let out a small laugh. The warrior immediately spun around, his eyes blazing. "Is something funny?"
"Shall we report the child to the sub-commander?" the second warrior said impudently.

The first warrior's face darkened and he turned back around to backhand Tarc. He then roughly threw Tarc to the ground. "That was for speaking against me."
Tarc stayed on the ground, nursing his split lip. Tears were in his eyes, and they seemed to satisfy the warrior. The leader of the ground spun dramatically around and stormed out of the room, his subordinates following him.
"Well? Was there anything or anyone of note?"
"No sub-commander. Just a pair of infidel children."
"Very well, the others found nothing as well, let us depart. The quicker we finish these sweeps the sooner we can be off this cesspool of a planet."
"I still got it," Tarc smiled, despite the cut on his lip.
Jysella, who was only just beginning to register what had happened, quickly crawled out of the corner she had been curled up in and to his side. "Tarc!"
"Hey, I'm fine. I got beatings worse than this on Ylesia," Tarc grinned, wincing when the action stretched his bleeding lip.
Jysella placed a hand over the cut and concentrated. After a few seconds, the pain went away and the cut was healed.
Tarc blinked in surprise, his own hand going up to the now-repaired wound. "Wow, thanks."
"It was the least I could do," Jysella mumbled, looking downcast. "I should be the one saying thanks. Some Jedi I am."
"Don't beat yourself up," Tarc shrugged. "I was terrified out of my mind when I first became a Vong slave. Happens to everyone. At least I was able to learn how to manipulate the dumber Vong from that experience."
"You were a Vong slave?" Jysella's eyes grew wide.
"Uh huh," Tarc, picked up her hot chocolate cup and gave it back to her. "If you want, I can tell you all about it."
Jysella nodded, her heart slowly regaining its normal rhythm. "Yeah."
"Alright, it all began when Viqi Shesh approached me on Coruscant two years ago…."

0-[IV]-0 0-[IV]-0

"You doing okay?"
Natua started at the sound of Ganner's voice, quickly attempting to raise her emotional barriers.
"Hey, none of that, now," Ganner said gently, ducking low as he entered the small maintenance hatch.
"Jedi Knight Rhysode? What are you doing down here, how'd you fine me?"

"It's just Ganner, Natua. And finding you wasn't that hard," Ganner shrugged, clearing away a small crate so he could sit on the floor next to her. "Small ship, not many places where one could hide away from all the others. As to what I'm doing here, I figured you'd be a bit like me—worried about your friends but not wanting anyone else to realize it. You're Jedi Knight Natua Wan, Green Girl and stoic extraordinaire."
Natua looked away.
"Thought so." Ganner placed a kind hand on her knee.
"Falleen do not…do not appreciate outward displays of emotion," Natua managed. There was something about Ganner that made her feel comfortable opening up. As if he had been correct to say that they were alike despite their obvious personality differences. "Open passion is discouraged. Discipline, control—much like the way of the Jedi—are praised. Worry is not a…feeling…I am used to experiencing. I did not think I would be so concerned about people whom were only passing acquaintances to me. Or at least I thought were only passing acquaintances. The distance and time away has made me realized that perhaps they meant more to me than I had thought. Even you and Jedi Zekk have become my…my…"
"Friends?" Ganner smiled.
Natua nodded, almost shyly playing with the blue beads in the braid of her black hair. "Yes, friends. Growing up…first as a Falleen, and then as a Jedi…this galaxy has become a lot different than what I had expected, what I had been told it would be like."
"No kidding," Ganner chuckled, leaning back against the bulkhead. "You mentioned earlier that you worry for Jedi Knight Tekli?"
"Tekli, Zekk, Tesar, Lowbacca, the Solos definitely," Ganner ticked off a finger for each name. "I mean, how could you *not* worry about the Solos once you're friends with them? Heck I'm even worried about Alema and the Queen Mother. But it's not like I can do much. I have to trust in their own skills, their own abilities, to keep themselves alive. If I spent time worrying about them, about what's to come tomorrow, I'd go crazy in a heartbeat."
"And this foolish shell you present to the others?" Natua said wisely.
"See, we're definitely alike if you could see through it so easily," Ganner sighed tiredly, his ever present grin fading. "In the grand scheme of things, I can't do much. I can't end the war with a wave of my hand, save anyone from dying, or reach across the stars and liberate entire systems. I leave those impossible feats to the Solos. To the real heroes. Me, the only thing I can do is help out those around me, make this war a little less grim. To brighten up the galaxy if only for those few moments I'm in the room. And if by acting as a fool, I

make the galaxy a brighter place, if only for an instant, then it's worth it. In times like this, a smile and a joke can go a long way, and can be worth a whole lot more than a flask of alcohol."
"Falleen do not smile," Natua said, the corners of her lips twitching. "That's an outward sign of emotion, of passion."
"Are Falleen allowed to smile on the inside?" Ganner cocked is head.
After a moment of contemplation, Natua nodded. "We are. It is a demonstration that we have the discipline to hide it."
"Then smile on the inside then," Ganner's grin returned. "Smile and laugh on the inside as often as you can. When your friends are feeling down, feeling scared, do something un-Falleen like and get them to smile along with you. No matter what this galaxy throws at you, do your best to brighten it up no matter where you are. And if it's your turn to return to the Force, make sure you do so with a smile on your face. I'm sure all the dead Jedi Masters of old are tired of greeting Jedi full of fear and uncertainty. You know, 'Congratulations, you're dead, why so grim? It ruins the great party we've set up for you.'"
At that Natua did emit a small laugh, looking away in embarrassment almost immediately.
Ganner laughed as well. "See, you can be Falleen, be a Jedi, be in control of your emotions, but at the same time be that one person to make everyone laugh and roll their eyes no matter how dark the galaxy has become."
"You do realize the ridiculousness of your advice?" Natua said, trying to hide her mirthfulness. "You are trying to make me the first Falleen comedian ever."
"I like to set my goals big," Ganner said brightly. "But you understand what I'm saying, right, Green Girl?"
Natua smiled a small, almost timid smile, her green skin brightening with her mood. "Thank you, Jedi Knight Rhysode. I am ashamed to admit that I drastically underestimated you at first."
"Nothing to be ashamed of. Like you said, this shell I show everyone is meant to deceive. Just like your stoic Falleen-ness."
Natua let out a breath, gratefulness showing in her eyes. "I will take your lessons to heart, Jedi Knight Rhysode."
"See that you do, Jedi Knight Wan. *I* am an all-knowing Jedi after all," Ganner tilted his head back superiorly, causing Natua to shake her head in disbelief. "I'll let you get back to Valin and the others. Just remember, smile and laugh, no matter how bad things get."
0-[V]-0 0-[V]-0
Nom Anor, more recently known as Yu'shaa the Prophet, could not believe his luck. Though the Freed One movement had helped him gain

followers at a rapid rate and enabled him to conceal his true motives, the true test had been when the Jedi Tahiri Kwaad had arrived. Had he masked himself sufficiently to throw off her suspicions?
As the Prophet, he lamented the death of his loyal follower Ekh'm Val and those who had served with him. In private, Ekh'm Val's death had been carefully orchestrated. High Priest Naazar had realized that suspicion was falling on him and he needed to do something to prove his loyalty. Ekh'm Val was one of Shimrra's most wanted traitors and had outlived his usefulness. Once Ekh'm had relayed to the others his experience with Zonama Sekot, and the Master Shaper of Domain Nim had stepped forward with knowledge of Zonama's whereabouts, he had no other purpose. Ekh'm had no ship, or real skill at subterfuge, and his domain markings were easily recognizable. Added to the fact that Shimrra was promising a great reward to anyone who killed or brought Ekh'm in alive, and the warrior had become more of a liability than an asset.
All Yu'shaa had to do was call a meeting of a handful of disposable followers, ensure the Naazar was aware of said meeting, and let the 'gods' do the rest. Since such raids by Naazar and his Hand of Yun-Yammka were common, no one questioned the sad coincidence of the meeting being raided at the same time Yu'shaa's travel to said meeting had been 'delayed'.
And then the Jedi Tahiri Kwaad had the fortune to arrive on Yuuzhan'tar a mere day before the mass ceremonies that would occupy the majority of the guards protecting Shimrra's compound. At first when she recommended traveling with the rest of the Freed Ones heading to Zonama Sekot, Nom Anor had been wary. With that many independent-minded Yuuzhan Vong, his chance of discovery would have been high.
But then another idea crossed his mind.
As he followed Tahiri, her servant Shaeri, and the others across the dimly lit courtyard towards the shaper compound, Nom Anor pulled out a small flask full of liquid. It was a token of appreciation from one of his contacts still within Shimrra's inner-circle; a sample of the deadly, fast-replicating virus developed by Domain Rin's shapers in Imperial space. Once exposed inside the enclosed space of a ship of any sort, it was guaranteed to be lethal to all Yuuzhan Vong life in a matter of minutes. The ships fleeing from Borosk had managed to secure a small amount of the virus, and Shimrra's secretive collection of heretical shapers were promptly assigned to make more of it. And some of those early samples had fallen into Nom Anor's hands.
With the flask, a new plan had been formulated.

He would get the Jedi to introduce him to the Freed One leadership. Would leave the flask and a timed device aboard. Once he left, the device would activate and spread the virus throughout the vessel, killing the leaders of this heretical movement. He would then continue on to Zonama Sekot and carry out his own plans there. With the death of both Zonama Sekot and the Freed One leadership, Nom Anor knew that Shimrra would more than welcome him back.
Nom Anor tucked the flask back into the folds of his clothing. All in good time. First they had to 'liberate' the shaper and the ship in her possession.
0-[VI]-0 0-[VI]-0
"Veka, Kwaad," Tahiri whispered to the door membrane.
"Tahiri?" Shaeri said, sensing Tahiri's uncertainty. In the background, Yu'shaa's followers fanned out and secured the area.
"This damutek belongs to my domain," Tahiri said, staring up at the organic construction apprehensively even as the opening dilated.
"If you wish, I can find the shaper and you can wait out here," Shaeri murmured, placing a sympathetic but supportive hand on Tahiri's arm.
Tahiri swallowed and shook her head once and took a hesitant step forward. "No, I can do this. It's just weird, the memory that this is my other home, but feeling none of the attachment."
They both stepped into the damutek, and the membrane door closed behind them. Tahiri glanced at the winding paths before them and then motioned to the right one. "This way."
"Yu'shaa's instructions were to go in the opposite direction," Shaeri said in a low voice.
"I know," Tahiri's forehead scrunched. "But for some reason, this other path looks more familiar."
"If you say so, I will follow," Shaeri nodded.
They walked through the organic hallways, encountering no one. The hallway eventually gave way to a larger room, where a single Yuuzhan Vong was seated. She saw them enter, and both sides froze.
"Sister," Tahiri breathed, the sight of the seated shaper bringing back memories.
"Sister?" The bronze-eyed shaper blinked. Her eyes tracked upwards towards the three scars on Tahiri's forehead. "You are…the One-Who-Was-Shaped?"
Tahiri's jaw closed, confusion and pain in her expression as she tried to come to terms with the memories of someone who never was. Yet, if Riina had just been some random thoughts placed into her head, how then did she recognize the shaper in front of her?

"You are Ahsi Yim," Tahiri said shakily, supported by Shaeri's reassuring grip on her hand.
"How do you know my name?" Ahsi stiffened, her own eyes widening.
"I…you are my sister? No," Tahiri gripped both sides of her head, gasping for air. "No, how can that be? In the memories I was given, you are my sister. We grew up on the World Ship. You were one of the few to know of Yakun Kwaad…and my feelings for him? But I've never met a Yakun."
All the blood drained from Ahsi's face and the shaper closed her eyes. "Oh sister, what did you do to this *Jeedai?*"
"You know of what she speaks," Shaeri said, keeping herself protectively between the shaper and her still confused friend.
"I do," Ahsi blinked slowly. She slowly moved one hand. "If you will permit me to contact my sister, my real sister, perhaps more can be explained."
Shaeri nodded curtly, and Ahsi stroked a small villip on the end of the table.
"Come, sit," Shaeri said, leading Tahiri into the room.
Tahiri allowed the smaller Freed One to guide her, looked about the room in complete confusion and shock. How could some place she had never been to seem so familiar?"
A few seconds later, they could hear someone approach through the hallway. "Ahsi, I told you that I needed to be in the Shaping room when the…"
There was another pause.
"You!" Tahiri's eyes widened.
Nen Yim's expression reflected shock for a moment, before melting into a resigned, almost bitter grin. "So you are the Jedi Yu'shaa sent to collect me. The gods truly do have a sense of humor after all."
"She has your memories, sister," Ahsi said abruptly. "She can speak in our tongue and knows of Yakun."
"And of P'loh and Zhul," Tahiri said in Yuuzhan Vong, her green eyes a myriad of emotion as she gazed upon her tormentor. The names of her crèche-mates, of Nen Yim's crèche-mates, stood out amongst her implanted memories of her Yuuzhan Vong childhood.
"Do you know of an incident involving a fighting n'amiq?"
"The lizard-bird things the warriors used to fight?" Tahiri blinked. "I…I found one, it was injured. I took it in to heal it. But when it was better, another crèche-mate took it. I ran to catch up…"
"And when you arrived, it was already dead," Nen Yim replied, looking as haunted as Tahiri.
"Yes…" Tahiri breathed. "But how…?"

"My sister is correct," Nen Yim said with a short, biting laugh. "You do indeed have my memories." *Mezhan Kwaad, may the gods devour you twice a day.*

Tahiri looked away, her eyes watering. Not knowing what else to do, she reached back out across the stars and gripped onto her bond with Anakin, using his constant presence to stabilize herself. She sniffled once, then looked back to Nen Yim, who was standing stalk still in the entrance. "You've got yourself a new hand."

"I am a Master Shaper now," Nen Yim replied, casually holding up her hand equipped with the same finger-lances Mezhan once had. "Are you contemplating ending my life?"

"Yes…no," Tahiri shook her head, pulling herself to her feet. "What you and Mezhan did may have hurt, may have nearly driven me mad. But I'm better for it. In some strange way the two of you gave me a second family."

"Not intentional on my part, I assure you," Nen Yim said sardonically.

"Whatever happened to P'loh?" Tahiri asked, smiling faintly. All those old axioms about meeting one's self, or looking into the mirror and wondering if you'll like the person you are, becoming more ironic as the shock faded.

"P'loh was assigned to Belkadan, and killed there," Nen Yim answered slowly. "Would you know what happened to Zhul? Official reports was that he was killed in a raid on a meeting of heretics but…"

"He's representing Domain Yim on the Supreme Council," Tahiri replied. "I always wondered why he seemed so familiar to me."

Nen Yim closed her eyes briefly in silent thanks.

Tahiri rubbed at her forehead. "Force, I have so many questions to ask you. But this isn't the time. We can talk more on the journey to Zonama Sekot?"

"Yes," Nen Yim replied simply, her mind still trying to wrap itself around Mezhan's machinations. It appeared that even from the grave, the heretical shaper still haunted her.

"The Prophet says you have a ship?"

"I do," Nen Yim swallowed, latching onto the subject to avoid the confusing swell of emotions she was feeling. "It is back the way we came."

"Ahsi are you coming with us?" Tahiri glanced to the other shaper.

"My place is here," Ahsi shook her head. "I must stay and shape the Eighth Cortex in place of my sister. The future of our people depends on it."

"Let another do it," Shaeri said, glancing back and forth between Tahiri and the two shapers. "Shimrra will surely kill you if we leave. Even if it does look like Nen Yim was abducted."
"Besides, what type of shaper are you if you could pass up an opportunity to see the planet that is the origin of Yuuzhan'tar?" Tahiri added, having a strange desire to know more of this sister she had never known or met.
Ahsi looked to Nen Yim, and then slowly nodded her head. "If you wish me to travel with you, I would be honored."
"Come then," Nen Yim said shortly. "We do not have much time before the change in guard and we have wasted enough of it already."
0-[VII]-0 0-[VII]-0
It was like the start of a very bad Yuuzhan Vong joke. A prophet, a heretic priest, two heretical shapers, two heretical warriors, a Shamed One, and a Shaped Jedi all get into an organic ship Shaped by a sentient planet.
"The gods are truly kind to bless us with this vessel. I foresee great changes occurring in the future," the prophet says. "Thank you, *Jeedai,* for leading us here."
"I didn't do anything, I was just as surprised as you are," the Shaped Jedi said modestly. "Who knew that you would follow a Jedi because of a crazy idea, to a planet that supposedly exists only in rumor, in order to find the salvation of your entire race?"
"This ship is indeed a wondrous feat. So like our own biots, yet different," says one shaper. "It is amazing to think that there is an entire planet out there capable of creating such a craft. That our search for a new home can actually take place without any more warring."
"We were able to meld a cognition hood into its controls so that we could pilot it," says the other shaper. "There is no doubt that this is a ship of our homeworld and that Shimrra has been lying all this time."
"All those lives lost, all the honor our domains have procured in this war, it truly meant nothing," one of the awestruck heretical warriors said, distressed. "What have we been fighting for all this time?"
"It is hard to believe that Shapers, Priests, Warriors, and Shamed could ever be on the same level," the other warrior said.
"It is all thanks to the *Jeedai* and their ways that we have seen through the lies and banded together like this," the heretic priest said with a nod. "Who would have thought that decades of oppression and violence were all based on lies?"

The Shamed One looks at all the others and says while rolling her eyes. "If any of you had only asked me, I could have said as much a long time ago."

In actuality, the words weren't too different. The overall message was pretty much the same as the most unique and unlikely crew rocketed past surprised Yuuzhan Vong patrols in their captured, re-shaped, and then stolen Sekotian spacecraft. The eight-member crew was fairly cramped in the ship meant to carry only six at most, yet they somehow managed to manage.

Though the ship was organic, its layout was more akin to the metal-and-plasteel ships of the Galactic Alliance. Behind the cockpit was a crew cabin comfortably large enough for six or seven people, and six somewhat more cramped sleeping cells. Behind that was a spacious storage area that looked more Yuuzhan Vong in design and was filled to the brim with Shaping materials and Yuuzhan Vong food-goods.

After some initial discussion with the others, Garagh and Kunra decided to spend the trip standing guard in front of the Prophet's 'room.' Yu'shaa stayed out of everyone's way, retreating to said room almost as soon as the trip started.

Naazar likewise retreated to his own compartment on the ship, evidently to meditate on the absurdness of his participation. He was, after all, the High Priest of Yun-Yammka, Hunter of Heretics, and destroyer of infidels. He was supposed to be one of the Supreme Overlord's most pious advisors. Yet, here he was, on a ship whose existence Shimrra would deny, traveling with heretics and a Jedi. For someone who's had his entire belief system up-ended and his world turned on its head, he was coping pretty well. At least, that's what he wanted the others to think. The ludicrousness of his situation was not lost on him, and at time he truly did wonder if he had gone insane. While he traveled safely on this alien vessel, he had no doubt that Shimrra was 'cleansing' the priests of Yun-Yammka, trying to weed out any more potential traitors. And with all the changes that had been going on in the past few months, he definitely needed some time to himself.

Both Shaeri and Ahsi had retreated to the back of the ship to monitor the dovin basal and other vital organs the ship relied on for space travel. For two different people from very different walks of life, they seemed to have gotten along surprisingly well. Of course, if anyone asked, they were secretly watching the other for any sign of treachery. One of the other reasons why Ahsi had joined Shaeri at the back of the ship was also because she had found it more than unnerving that the infidel Jedi had the memories of her older sister. All the private

conversations, the doubts and fears she had admitted to Nen Yim, this Tahiri knew them all. Ahsi, of course, was no stranger to using alternative Shaping doctrines to get the job done. Just like her sister, she had discovered the limitations of the acceptable Shaping methods and had been forced to turn to other means over the course of her life. She had turned to her sister for advice, and through multiple villip calls, became just as skeptical of the Yun'o and the so-called religious rite Shimrra had used to coax their race into the war. Naturally, she had expected to be executed when she had been discovered, and had been only further embittered when Shimrra kept her alive for the sole purpose of continuing his deception. And Nen Yim knew all of that. They were as close as two Yuuzhan Vong sisters could be, even though they had a different father. To think another now shared in this bond was more than a little disturbing.

"If you think it odd, imagine what Tahiri feels," Shaeri said absently, tending to the dovin basal. "Until your sister and her master Shaped her, she was a perfectly happy, unconfused human Jedi."

"To Domain Kwaad, Domain Yim has always been just another creature to Shape," Ahsi said bitterly. She was behind Shaeri adjusting the organism that kept the air within the vessel breathable. "Be it Mezhan or her sister Qelah, we were just another project to them. And that *Jeedai* is only proof of it. Were Mezhan still among the living, I would happily speed her journey to the gods. It is the ultimate violation, transplanting my sister's memories into that infidel girl."

"Tahiri is not to blame," Shaeri said simply. "And neither is your sister or Mezhan Kwaad."

"Then who?" Ahsi hissed, becoming stalk-still as she tried to get a grip on her conflicted emotions. "Who is at fault then? Why must I become a fugitive simply for wanting to help my people? Why must my sister continue to suffer such indignities, the ignominy of being Shimrra's pet Shaper? We were a proud race once! The gods meant something once! Your Tahiri is an abomination against everything us Shapers have been taught! Is a perversion of the Yun'o and all that is right. If it is not Mezhan Kwaad's fault, then who do I blame?"

"We have only ourselves to blame," Shaeri commented, her hands stilled, but she still concentrated on the dovin basal. "The Prophet is right when he says that much of our success at challenging Shimrra has been due to the Jedi. Shapers, Priests, Warriors, Shamed Ones, none of us ever questioned Shimrra when he said that this galaxy was ours for the taking. When he claimed that this galaxy was a gift to us from the gods. There was opposition to Shimrra, but only for selfish gains. We could have cared less about where Shimrra was leading us,

we were all deceived by his lies. Only when the Jedi Corran Horn slew Shedao Shai did we begin to wonder. Only when two Jedi barely older than myself fought well on Myrkr did we begin to question aloud. And only after the death of Czulkang did we finally make a stand. We could have spared both our race and this galaxy many deaths, much pain, had we only had the strength to voice our doubts and depose Shimrra. But that is in the past, wishing will not make it so. What we must do is ensure that this never happens again. That the future of the Yuuzhan Vong will be decided by *all* Yuuzhan Vong and not one mad man."
"You are quite wordy for a Shamed One," Ahsi remarked with an amused smirk.
"Freed One, Master Shaper," Shaeri corrected, returning the smirk with mischief-filled eyes. "And it is hard not to be after being in the company of Jedi for a year and a half. The Jedi are very fond of their speeches."
The remaining two occupants of the vessel were camped out in the cockpit, an awkward silence between the two of them as they focused on the sensations coming in from the Yuuzhan Vong-installed cognition hoods. Neither was looking at the other, with both trying not to think about the common bond they shared.
What was there to say to someone who had the same memories as yourself?
"Do you know," Nen Yim began softly. "When it was the last time I gazed on stars like this?"
"No, when?" Tahiri said in a subdued voice. She could hear the silent anger in the Master Shaper's words and it puzzled her.
"It was on the Worldship *Baanu Miir*, one of the older ones. Its brain was failing, and an involuntary muscle spasm ripped one of the arms open. I stood in the vacuum staring at the naked stars, and I swore that no matter what, I would save that Worldship and the people on it. I practiced heresy to do so, and still failed. Even yet, the people might have lived if your infidel friends hadn't obliterated the new Worldship we were meant to move into."
"I…"
"Let me finish," Nen Yim cut in, her eyes blazing with a myriad of emotion. "I have risked my life, taken life and Shaped many terrible things for my people so that we may never have to live in the abyss between galaxies again. My sister and I have hated the *Jeedai*, hated this war, hated the paradox our lives have become. Thousands continue to die despite our best efforts. We Shape to save Yuuzhan Vong, and infidel die. Your infidel scientists come up with technology that counters our own creations, and Yuuzhan Vong die. For all the life

Ahsi and I value, we have seen only death. Worse yet, the more people die, the further away from hate we must be. Our heresy requires us to see things as they are, not as we wish them to be, not as we fear them to be." Nen Yim let out a slightly deranged laugh. "We Shape to preserve life and hate when our people die needlessly. But to save more life, we can't hate, we can't develop feelings for the lives we're trying to preserve. The good of our people comes first, but we are branded as outcasts and heretics by our people. No matter what we do, how heretical our Shaping has become, we just cannot seem to make a difference in any way. Not on *Baanu Miir,* nor on your Coruscant. Ours is a wretched and miserable existence, and I will not blame you, after everything we have done, if you hate us too."
"That's a lot of hate," Tahiri commented gently, battling with her own conflicting emotions. "And it isn't my place to judge you. You've already set a heavy burden onto your shoulders. What right would I have to criticize you one way or another?"
"Even after what Mezhan Kwaad did to you?"
"Especially then. Like I said earlier, it made my bond with my childhood best friend all the stronger, has given me a new perspective most Jedi don't have." Tahiri blinked several times as she focused on the vast array of stars through her cognition hood. "I can't say I agree with your methods, but you truly have the best interests of your people in mind. That's more that can be said of many Yuuzhan Vong on either side of the war."
"I have always wondered why so many were so willing to exchange one set of lies for another, slightly more pleasant set," Nen Yim said wryly after a brief pause. "You are no more an avatar of the gods, or a goddess yourself, then I am. Yet there are the hundreds of thousands of your so-called 'Freed Ones' willing to take up arms in the name of the freedom granted to them by the *Jeedai*. This Prophet that travels with us is but one of the many sheep that follow in the misguided notion that our salvation lies with another."
"We're trying to correct that view," Tahiri said. "Jedi don't want to lead Yuuzhan Vong any more than you do. I guess, if any of the less devout of the Freed Ones puts some thought to it, they would say that they are going with the lesser of two evils. Sure the Jedi being avatars of the gods may be a lie, but at least we don't hold mass executions and torture sessions for everyone who disagrees with us. We represent a clear alternative to Shimrra's reign, an option they didn't have before."
"True," Nen Yim said sarcastically. "And when the *Jeedai* are gone, how do you expect any Yuuzhan Vong government to stand up by itself? If there is one thing the Prophet is right about is that the *Jeedai* have

become a crutch with which half our race now leans against. Kick it away, and you will have nothing but chaos and infighting. Sure you have strengthened your side of the war, but in doing so, you have made the Yuuzhan Vong weaker, a mockery of themselves. 'Supreme Council?' Farmers and merchants? Can you really believe the majority of the Yuuzhan Vong under Shimrra will even *want* that kind of lifestyle?"
"As opposed to constant warfare, yes."
"You are not that naïve," Nen Yim rebuked. "Or if you are, I am even more incredulous as to how you managed to fan the flames of the various heretical movements with that type of outlook. You cannot just give a warrior a shovel and Shaping materials and say 'here, build yourself a new life.' You cannot form a new government and expect the Intendant caste to so happily embrace it, especially if it means that whole domains will lose the status they monopolize under Shimrra. Just the same, you can't give Shamed Ones positions of power and expect them to work miracles, to not fall into the same types of abuses that have been inflicted upon them. There are so many flaws with the Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement, my fear of it almost rivals the fear of what I have become in my attempts to better my race. You, and all the sheep who follow the *Jeedai* as avatars of the gods, may think they have built a free society, but again, it is another society built upon lies."
"Then why are you coming with us if you think this?" Tahiri removed the cognition hood at the same time as Nen Yim.
"Zonama Sekot," Nen Yim said honestly. "The riddle of the living planet may provide the missing piece of the puzzle I have been seeking, the answer to the problems our people have been facing. A place with no falsehoods, with no warring or strife. Where life began so many thousands of years ago. I have no doubt that Zonama Sekot is the salvation of our people. Why else would Shimrra fear it so? Despite your success against him, Shimrra fears no *Jeedai* or infidel, fears no heretical movement or Shamed One rebellion. What makes him accelerate his plans, what grips him in such panic, is the mere idea that this planet will appear and tear the veil of lies away. Why else would he have me drop all my projects to research ways to kill this ship? Why else would he silence anyone who even dares mention this ship or its origins? And when Ekh'm Val escaped his iron grip to spread the word of Zonama Sekot, Shimrra was as desperate a man as I have ever seen. Zonama Sekot, I have to see it for my own eyes. I must talk with it. It might be our salvation as the Prophet preaches, or it could be the greatest threat our people have ever faced."
"Threat?"

"I will know when I finally see it," Nen Yim said mildly. "After so long, I will not allow anyone else to deceive my people again."
"You aren't alone in your beliefs, Nen Yim," Tahiri said gently. "Most of Domain Rin would rather work on the outskirts of the movement than become a part of it. They Shape to give life, to improve not only Yuuzhan Vong, but the rest of this galaxy as well."
"That is not the Domain Rin I am familiar with," Nen Yim tilted her head questioningly.
"Domain Rin's former leader came back and cleaned house," Tahiri shrugged. "Jaina promoted one of the younger shapers to take control. They've been working with Galactic Alliance science teams to reverse some of the ecological damage done by planetary Shaping—trying to make sure the Yuuzhan Vong have a place in this galaxy. They could use someone like you to teach them about all the new Shaping techniques you've developed. And you and our sister won't have to shoulder your burden all by yourselves. Domain Rin will be one of the domains represented in the convoy of Freed One vessels we'll be joining. If you wish to converse with their new Domain Leader, Ne'rai, she will be among them."
Nen Yim released a long breath and stared at the opaque wall in front of her. There was just so much change, so much yet to be changed. It seemed like an insurmountable task, like she would never truly live to see the Yuuzhan Vong she longed to see. And yet, the Jedi have managed to change more in several years than what her entire lifetime of devotion to saving her people had accomplished. "What I will do will depend on what I will find at Zonama Sekot. But…thank you, I will consider it. I know enough of Ne'rai to know that she is in a position similar to my own several years ago, a young adept just beginning to question everything she had been taught."
"A perfect student for you," Tahiri smiled.
"As if having one clone of me wasn't enough," Nen Yim said with a small scoff, placing her cognition hood back over her head. "But as I said, I can plan for nothing until I know what Zonama Sekot is to our people."
"Understood," Tahiri likewise placed her own hood back over her head. "But our people *do* have a future, Nen Yim. A bright one where they can live without fear or violence. Keep hope alive, and you will definitely live to see that day."
0-[Chapter Break]-0
A\N: Double-update Wednesday! Happy One Year Anniversary of the Story Being Posted! It was this time last year that the first chapter went up. Couldn't finish posting it by now, but the end is not far...

Tentative update schedule for the rest of the story- 11/17-(57), 11/18-(58), 11/26-(59), 11/28-(Interlude & 61), 11/30- (62), 12/1-(63), 12/2-(64), 12/5 (65 & 66), 12/8 (67), 12/11 (Last Chapter!), 12/16 (Epilogue).
On December 30th the first one-shot in the tentatively titled 'Destiny and Fate Collide' (more than likely to get a better name) will be posted. DaFC will be a collection of fish-sized, character-centric, one-shots filling in parts of the seven years between the end of this story and the start of the sequel. No major characters will star in these one-shots, as the one-shots will serve as a way to introduce new characters for the sequel and catch up on the fates of some of the minor ones. Projected to be 6-10 'chapters' long with monthly updates.
Thanks to all who have reviewed and supported the story so far. We're almost there, four more weeks.
Well, if you have the time, the next chapter awaits!

ADA 56

Fifty-Six
0-[I]-0 0-[I]-0
Tenel Ka stared out the viewport in grim thought as she mulled over Tekli's report. Apparently the new Warmaster had decided to personally go toe-to-toe with Admiral Kre'fey, and scored a decisive, much-needed, victory for the Yuuzhan Vong.
Of Admiral Kre'fey's taskforce, out of the three fighter wings under his command, barely three squadrons had made it out. The strongest capital ship left was an on-fire *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, and with General Farlander incapacitated, the highest ranking officer left was a major.
Admiral Kre'fey hadn't been Nas Choka's only victim. From various couriers, and from impressions Tenel Ka had received in the Force, this Warmaster was a step above his predecessor. She was hearing of tactics never before demonstrated by the Yuuzhan Vong—hit-and-run assaults, feigned retreats, use of the Galactic Alliance's own fleet formations, and most importantly, he didn't needlessly sacrifice his ships and warriors like Tsavong had done. Galactic Alliance offensives in multiple sectors had ground completely to a halt under Nas Choka's reign, with Yuuzhan Vong making advances for the first time in an entire year and half. Worse was that Nas Choka also knew the limits of his forces and was perfectly willing to let his enemy go so he could shore up a system's defenses and entrench his forces there.
"And you are certain he will make an attempt on Taanab?" Tenel Ka said.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Tekli replied softly. "He has made it clear that securing the Inner Rim for the Yuuzhan Vong is a priority. All nearby Galactic Alliance fleet elements have already been pursued back into the Colonies, but the moment they enter that region, the Yuuzhan Vong break off their pursuit. I am not a military strategist by any means, but I believe he is trying to create a buffer zone in which his forces can operate with impunity. With the Inner Rim secure, they will have consolidated their power base from the Deep Core outwards."
"And I agreed, your Majesty," ranking Galactic Alliance officer and commander of what was left of the fighter squadrons, Major Zindra Daine spoke up. She looked as tired as Tekli, with dried blood caking her hands and heavy bags under her eyes. "As adaptable as Nas Choka is proving, he's still ideologically a Yuuzhan Vong. As such, the well-being of his people comes first. Once he takes the Inner Rim, he will have brought more time for his people to recover from their major losses at Ebaq Nine, Hutt Space, and elsewhere. He'll also have successfully protected the colonies that the Yuuzhan Vong have established in the Inner Rim and Core worlds, enabling them to rebuild their number. Taking Taanab is as much an ideological as it is a strategic victory. If we lose Taanab, the Warmaster proves his worth and can focus on directing the myriad of forces he has scattered along the Mid and Outer Rim territories without outside interference."
"Understood," Tenel Ka said clasping her hands behind her. "If the two of you will not mind, Hapes will take control of what is left of the Hegemony and Galactic Alliance forces. The both of you look as if you will collapse at any moment."
"Your help will be most appreciated, Tenel Ka," Tekli smiled gratefully. "With both Master Madurrin and myself resting, should you need anything, Jedi Knight Seff Hellin should have recovered sufficiently to handle the basic tasks."
"By your leave then," Zindra bowed politely.
"We will simply have to hold out until Zekk and the others arrive," Tenel Ka said. "The fleet I have brought with me may not be as numerous as the force Admiral Kre'fey had at his disposal, but it will prove a hard meal to chew. We will hold Taanab. *That* is a fact."
0-[II]-0 0-[II]-0
"You're running on fumes," Nemodian Twin Sun's pilot, Lieutenant Vale, said lightly. With Lowbacca still on Corellia, the command of the squadron had fallen onto her. She *still* wasn't a good pilot, but she had managed to survive the slugging matches thanks to her ability to assign others tasks they best excelled at. "Another cup of caf help?"

"That and a meditation trance," Valin said with a weary laugh, accepting Vale's offered brew. "Who knew that being on alert for almost every single minute of the week could be so draining?"
"Hey, it's thanks to you we've managed to hold Duro for as long we have."
Valin took a long drink of the caffeinated beverage, relishing the warm liquid as it slid down his throat. "Sometimes it feels like the weight of the galaxy's on my shoulders."
"Hang in there, Jedi Horn. We definitely need you."
"Thanks Vale, you doing okay too?" Unlike many of the pilots he knew, Vale wasn't the type to look down on another or brag about her accomplishments. For Valin, if he could sum her up in a single word, it would be 'brave'. She *knew* she wasn't the best pilot out there and flew every sortie knowing full well her chance of returning we much slimmer than most. Yet she stuck to her duty, to her squadmates, and tried to make whatever contribution she could.
Vale had signed up shortly after her home-planet had fallen to the Yuuzhan Vong. Only seventeen then, she had gone through basic training and had the fortune, or misfortune depending on one's point of view, to be assigned to Twin Sun's squadron straight out of training. Two years on, and she was *still* trying to prove to herself that the assignment hadn't been a fluke, that her abilities were the reason why she had landed a spot on one of the premier squads in the Galactic Alliance.
The Nemodian sighed and grimaced, the stress of the situation showing in the slight molted look of her greenish-gray skin. "Flying three sorties a day is pushing everyone to their limits. At the rate we're going, soon everyone's going to be flying like me on a bad day."
"Tell me about it," Valin sighed. Being the only Force-sensitive left in the fleet meant that all Vong-detecting had fallen to him. Though he was successful in keeping the Vong at bay, the toll on his body was clear in his slouched posture and the completely defeated expression on his face. "I'll be willing to kiss the Vong commander if they stopped their hourly attacks."
"Any word on our reinforcements?"
"I've been in contact with Yaqeel, they're two days out."
Vale made a grunting croak at the back of her throat, expressing her displeasure in her native language.
"I know how you feel. The Vong aren't making it easier for them," Valin nodded, his Force sensitivity enabling him to understand her non-verbal cursing. "At last message, some guy name Zhat Lah sent a couple of self-propelled asteroids at them when he yanked them out of

hyperspace with some dovin basal mines. Or at least I *think* that's what Yaqeel was trying to tell me. Force, I can't even remember being this exhausted before. Forget two days, I doubt I can keep up the advance warning thing for another two hours."
"It'd be nice of the Yuuzhan Vong and Corellians to attack us all at once, for once," Vale agreed.
Valin opened his mouth, and then closed it. There was a disturbance in the Force, an actual disturbance unlike the plots of nothingness created by the Yuuzhan Vong.
"Did my big mouth just jinx us?" Vale groaned, leaning forward so that her forehead touched her flight helmet.
"No," Valin shook his head. He stood and quickly made his way towards the bridge. "If…if all the sleep-depravation hasn't made me crazy, I think we've actually just gotten some help."
"I thought you said Yaqeel and the others were still two days out?"
"They are," Valin said. "You're going to call me crazy, but a small army of Force sensitive droids have just arrived to help us."
"You're definitely crazy," Vale nodded, looking at him in concern.
The two entered the bridge at the same time as General Panib. "Jedi Horn, Lieutenant Vale."
"Sir," Vale saluted.
"Sensors, what do we have?"
"Not Vong, sir," the operator replied, sounding bewildered. "That's about all I can say. There are about thirty-six or so fighters and one weird looking metal dreadnaught sitting just off our port side."
"Receiving transmission from the dreadnaught."
"Go ahead," Panib motioned.
A holographic image of one of Lando's YVH-1 battledroids appeared.
"Greetings Galactic Alliance forces. I am Illum, Shard of the Iron Knights. We have come to aid you."
"Jedi Horn?" General Panib blinked in bewilderment.
"The Iron Knights are Jedi," Valin said slowly. "I've heard of them, but I've never seen them before. Sentient crystals placed in droid bodies."
"You mean to tell me that that droid is a Jedi?" General Panib said incredulously.
"I prefer to be called Illum, or Shard, general," Illum intoned in a slightly scolding, feminine-sounding, non-droid fashion. "*My appearance is simply a vessel with which I can move myself around."*
"Forgive me," Panib cleared his throat in obvious embarrassment. "I have never encountered…a Force sensitive being such as yourself. You are more than welcome to join us, Jedi Shard."

"We sense a Jedi aboard your fleet, but he appears to be in need of a recharge. If you will inform us of our duties, we will take his place while he recovers."
"Errr…" Valin ran a hand through his hair. "Right. I'm Jedi Valin Horn. I'll explain more soon. See you aboard, Illum."
"We look forward to it, Jedi Horn." The transmission ended.
"You know," Valin said, blinking. "When I said I wanted the Force to give me some help, I didn't quite expect this."
"On the bright side, you can finally get a few hours of shut-eye," Vale said lightly.
"After the Hutts, I didn't think our allies could get any stranger," General Panib laughed. "I guess this war does have a way of bringing everyone together."
0-[III]-0 0-[III]-0
Tahiri only allowed herself to truly relax when the small 'civilian' armada of Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessels flooded her perceptions through the cognition hood. They were still a few lightyears away from Zonama Sekot, but close enough that Tahiri could feel the full strength of her bond with Anakin. She sent a brief 'hi, I'll see you soon,' to him and got an eager 'I can't wait' in reply that boosted her drained spirits. *Force, she missed him.*
Grinning eagerly, she activated the installed villip cluster aboard her Sekotian vessel and waited as it took on the face of the Supreme Leader of the Free Yuuzhan Vong.
"Taan, thanks for waiting for us. Hope you weren't here too long," Tahiri waved.
"Not long at all. We're all anxious to see this Zonama Sekot for ourselves."
"I can tell," Tahiri glanced at the small flotilla. "How many people do you have aboard those ships?"
"Upwards of eighty thousand in this wave, mostly those tired of war and those with experience setting up colonies. If Sekot does not mind it, another two waves of fifty thousand are ready to disembark for the planet once we've finished preparations."
"It's kind of hard to believe if I wasn't seeing it for myself," Tahiri said in amazement. "I can't believe this war is actually going to end soon."
"I understand you've picked up a couple new allies?"
"Right," Tahiri leaned back slightly so the villip could see the rest of the cockpit. "Former High Priest of Yun-Yammka, Naazar. Master Shapers Ahsi and Nen Yim. And the Prophet Yu'shaa and his bodyguards, Garagh and Kunra."

"I look forward to meeting you in person, Supreme Leader," Yu'shaa clasped a fist to his chest and bowed his head in respect.
"And I you. You are definitely to be commended for garnering such a following in a place as dangerous for heretics as Coruscant."
"The truth can never be silenced, no matter how hard one tries. I am but a messenger for the gods, a vessel. It is their will that has granted me such success," Yu'shaa remarked modestly.
"And High Priest, I have to say that I am grateful you have seen through the lies Shimrra foisted on you."
"As am I," Naazar said mildly. "I am eager to see the true Yuuzhan'tar and all that it has to offer our people."
"We'll bring our ship to dock with yours," Tahiri said. "Is the *Blessed by the Jedi* still your flag?"
"It is," Taan nodded. *"Oh, and Tahiri, you will be happy to learn that Danni Quee is among the people joining us for this venture and she has brought you your ship."*
"My…the *Veila* is ready?" Tahiri brightened.
"Indeed, Danni and Kadat flew her here personally. It is a wondrous work of art. I can see why Kadat is proud of her. It is a shame Wryadra cannot be here with us to see both Zonama and the life he helped to craft."
"Yes, he would have loved her," Tahiri said softly. "In any case, I can't wait to see her again. We're bringing this ship in to dock."
"I'll be there to greet you personally."
The villip reverted and Tahiri nudge the ship towards their destination.
"The '*Veila*?" Nen Yim tilted her head.
"A ship Anakin commissioned for me," Tahiri nodded. "He and some shapers and scientists and mechanics got together and made a hybrid vessel. Since they hooked up the ship brain to a droid brain, the ship is much more sentient than an average Yuuzhan Vong vessel."
"Interesting, if not highly heretical," Ahsi Yim laughed. "Strangely enough, an abomination such as the one you describe only makes me more curious about it. If you would permit it, I would like to examine this sentient ship."
"Only if you don't refer to her as an abomination," Tahiri rolled her eyes. "Nen Yim, would you like to meet the *Veila* too?"
Nen Yim regarded Tahiri and Ahsi with an unreadable expression. "Perhaps. But before that, I would like to meet the members of Domain Rin. I am interested to see just how much they have changed since I last saw them."

"So, Shaeri will be with me, Yu'shaa will be meeting with Taan and the others, you two have your own things, how about you, Naazar?" Tahiri glanced at the High Priest.
"I…will look at this *Veila* as well, to pass the time of course," Naazar said. "If I were a priest of Yun-Ne'shel I have no doubt I would be falling over myself in awe. As I am not, I only have little interest in this jointly Shaped vessel."
"Sure," Tahiri hid her smirk. Out of his element, Naazar wasn't exactly a good liar. From the shine in Ahsi's eyes, it was clear the shaper had recognized this as well. "Alright, then, I'll let Taan know."
"Get ready," Shaeri said from the co-pilot's seat. "We're coming in to dock."
"These next few hours will prove most momentous indeed," Yu'shaa smiled benevolently. "I can hardly wait."
0-[IV]-0 0-[IV]-0
"Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, isn't your grandfather a former CorSec agent?" Tarc whispered as a Corellian YT-1300 freighter, the *Century Hawk,* coasted silently into the hangar.
"Please, for one, he's my *great* grandfather," Jysella smiled softly, rolling her eyes. As the days went by, she had been finding herself more and more at home with Tarc's very odd family. "And two, ever since Valin and I were born, both he and Grandpa Booster have been locked in some sort of unofficial competition to be the coolest grandparent ever. When Grandpa Rostek taught me how to encode messages in the genetic structures of flowers, Grandpa Booster taught me how to slice into computer systems used in most standard mid-line freighters. Then Grandpa Rostek taught me how to spot a tail and how to insert tracking programs into computers, so Grandpa Booster tried to teach me and Valin several smuggler tricks for hiding contraband and bribing customs agents with things other than credits and mindtricks."
"That sounds kind of neat."
"I was only five at the time!" Jysella laughed. "You try explaining to a five year old the intricacies of DNA manipulation, or which wires not to touch and which ones to cut after giving her a pair of scissors. But they definitely tried."
"You have a very weird family," Tarc chuckled with a shake of his head. "Says the guy with an Ewok as an uncle, a former smuggler-turned-starship-racer-turned-tour-guide as an aunt, and two parents whose idea of a vacation was to help overthrow the Peace Brigade government and adopt you."

"Yeah," Tarc exhaled with a wry grin. "Do you really think Rostek can help, though?"
"Uh huh," Jysella nodded as the Corellian freighter finally touched down. "He may be over a hundred, but his mind is still razor sharp. If anyone can think his way out of a problem, it's Grandpa Rostek."
"He's taking a big risk, you know," Kirney Slane said softly. "If this goes bad for him…"
"It won't," Jysella said with a confident smile. "Grandpa Rostek's gotten out of worst scrapes than an enemy-occupied planet."
The ramp lowered and Jysella eagerly bounded up to it. "Grandpa!"
An elderly man beamed as he scooped Jysella up in a loving hug. "Sella."
"Thanks for coming," Jysella beamed. "Now that you're here, we can figure out a way out of this mess."
Rostek laughed softly and patted his great-granddaughter's arm. "We'll see now, won't we?" Despite being close to a hundred and seventeen years old, Rostek Horn still stood proudly, without any stoop. His careworn wrinkled face was aged, yet his dark eyes still shined with intelligent light. He was thin and frail, but there was still some fight in him yet. "Why don't you introduce me to your new friends?"
Jysella motioned to Tarc, Kirney, and Myn and introduced each of them. "And Danielle and Kolot you've already met."
"It's an honor to meet you, sir," Kirney bowed her head politely. "You're a legend on Corellia."
"I'm flattered Ms. Petothel," Rostek said, keen eyes meeting Kirney's shocked ones. "Why so surprised? You didn't think I'd let just any Diktat sympathizer shuttle my great granddaughter around, did you?"
"It's Kirney now, sir," Kirney said with a ghost of a whisper as Myn wrapped a supportive arm around her.
"So it is," Rostek said kindly. "Thank you and your family for looking out for Jysella."
"It was no problem," Myn said with a nod. "I'm sorry we weren't able to extract her father. But the area he's in is still tightly locked down by the Vong."
"Corran will survive," Rostek replied with a nod. He glanced back to Jysella. "You Jedi are definitely resourceful. Before Danielle and Kolot located me, another of your party found me first."
Jysella blinked, and then her own eyes became round as she sensed another Force presence make its way to the back of the freighter. "Lowie!"
The Wookie Jedi emerged and let out a happy warble, sweeping up Jysella in a bear-hug that nearly had her vanish against him.

"Lowie! Air!" Jysella gasped. "I'm glad you survived too, but air!"
Lowbacca emitted an amused chuffing sound as he placed Jysella back down. "[It is a relief to see you again as well.]"
Jysella tried her best to tame her hair and brush Wookie hair off her clothing, mock glaring at Lowbacca as she did. "Bad walking carpet!"
"It was quite fun convincing the customs official that Lowbacca was Kolot's long lost cousin," Danielle said, emerging from the ship. "I think the Force kind of helped though."
"Really?" Tarc laughed.
"Yeah," Danielle smirked. "And even better, both Horn and Lowbacca have some very good news for us."
"Oh?" Kirney seemed to recover from her earlier shock.
"Yes," Rostek kept himself supported against his great granddaughter. "Who would have thought that at my age I'd be helping plan coups still."
"Another coup?" Tarc groaned. "And I thought a coup with two Corellians was bad enough! We're on an entire planet full of them!"
"I'll stock up on the paint bombs and laxatives," Jysella laughed, having heard all about Tarc's adventures on Ylesia.
"You do that," Danielle smiled.
"Perhaps you'd better explain," Myn said to Rostek, motioning to the office. "A coup?"
"Short version," Rostek said. "The Diktat's grip on power is tenuous at best. His decision to betray the Galactic Alliance hasn't been well received by most of the ruling aristocracy. Thing is, with the occupation force, no one is brave enough to say otherwise. I know that CorSec is willing to stand by us, provided we convince enough politicians that the Diktat is bad for Corellia. We remove the Diktat, and Corellian pride will take care of the rest. We Corellians hate being ruled by someone other than our own."
"What about the Yuuzhan Vong garrison?" Jysella asked.
"Leave them to your father," Rostek chuckled. "A straight up fight is more his thing anyway. Come now, your Wookie friend and I have a lot to tell you."

0-[V]-0 0-[V]-0

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't we supposed to be dropping out of hyperspace surrounded by friendly vessels," Ganner said, his light tone betrayed by the tension in his voice.
They had been forced to take a route through the Colonies to avoid several larger Yuuzhan Vong garrisons in the Mid Rim region. Unfortunately, the new Warmaster had been just as quick to reinforce the Colonies' region. Several dovin basals and a couple of ambushes

later, the reinforcements they were trying to bring to Taanab was scattered across a couple of different systems.
They *had* been trying to rendezvous with the others back in the Mid Rim, but after hitting an ion storm and several dovin basal-caused gravimetric fluctuations in the hyperspace route, they found themselves a bit further off course than they had intended. It was the equivalent of bouncing around several tornados and getting flung far from where you wanted to go.
"Blast it," Juno Eclipse hissed as their ship rocked violently from a barrage of plasma fire. "Rahm! The star charts, where in blazes did we drop out of hyperspace at?"
"Checking coordinates…not good. We're in the Core, Brentaal system."
"Brentaal? Those dovin basals must have pulled us further along our path than we thought!" Juno sent the ship into a spin. Brentaal was one of the Core systems that decided to fight rather than capitulate to the Yuuzhan Vong. Unfortunately, the Yuuzhan Vong hadn't been all that amused and brutally razed much of the planet to stamp out the rebellion. Though slave labor camps and small pockets of people still existed, the system was firmly in the hands of the local Yuuzhan Vong commander. "Get ready for another jump to hyperspace."
"Where?"
"We don't have time to recalibrate the hyperdrive after those last dovin basals and I don't want to push it any further. Chart a course to the nearest system," Juno said through gritted teeth. "And hurry, I can't dodge them forever."
"Coordinates set," Rahm reported a split second later. "Go!"
Juno reactivated the hyperdrive and the ship lurched forward and away from several closing Yuuzhan Vong picketships.
The jump was indeed short, after less than an hour of travel, they reemerged into real space.
"Corulag?" Juno emitted a wry laugh as she glanced at her son. "You plotted us a course *further* into Vong held space?"
"I figured we could help father," Rahm shrugged sheepishly.
"It looks like that's all we'll be able to do until we get a new ship," Zekk reported from behind. "That last jump just fried our hyperdrive."
"Corulag it is, then," Juno sighed. She glanced back at Rahm. "Why don't you let your father and sister know we're here."
"They already know, mother."
Juno glanced back to her passengers. "Well, this might not have been the planet we were expecting to defend, but at least it's still in one piece. How do you Jedi feel about helping the locals retake the system?"

"We were scheduled to save one system anyways," Ganner shrugged. "Why not."
"No arguments here, not like we can go anywhere else anyway," Zekk agreed.
"Let us hope the rest of the fleet made its way to Taanab," Natua voiced. "But as Jedi Rhysode has instructed me, we must make do with the hand we are dealt. I have no objections to helping liberate a Vong-held system."
"That's the spirit," Juno muttered under her breath.
"I can't think of any place better than to be trapped behind enemy lines on a Vong-held world, surrounded by Vong ready to grind us into a bloody pulp," Ganner said jovially.
"I can think of several places that would be better," Zekk said wryly.
"Yeah, but those places are boring," Ganner said, as Corulag began to grow bigger in the cockpit window. "You see, the reason why Corulag has yet to be rid of Vong is because they haven't had the pleasure of knowing Ganner Rhysode yet. Once I'm there, we'll have this Vong problem solved in no time."
"Yes," Zekk continued in a dry tone. "Why don't you draw another line in the ground, while Natua and I do something stupidly heroic."
"A combination of Myrkr and Palanhi. I like it, I like it," Ganner nodded, rubbing his chin sagely. "But what are our good pilots going to do in the meantime?"
"Form a fan club," Natua said unexpectedly, causing Zekk to shoot daggers at Ganner. "Cheer us on as we die in some heroic fashion befitting of a Jedi."
"One of you is enough, quit corrupting the younger ones."
Juno sighed and gave them an ever-suffering glance. "One thing is for sure, if the Yuuzhan Vong aren't going to run away screaming from your terrible comedy routine, the people of Corulag will."

0-[VI]-0 0-[VI]-0

"Taan," Tahiri hugged the Supreme Leader of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong with enthusiasm, grateful that one of the first Freed Ones was still among the living.
"Tahiri," Taan smiled genuinely. "You are well?"
"Uh huh," Tahiri nodded, stepping back. "And you?"
"As well as I can be."
Tahiri gestured to the others who had come off the Sekotian ship. "Shaeri you know, and these are our new…allies, I guess you could call them that. Nen and Ahsi Yim, Master Shapers. Former High Priest Naazar. The Prophet Yu'shaa, and his two bodyguards."

"It is nice to meet you all," Taan said politely. "You will understand, of course, if we assign an escort to you for the duration of your stay here. We've had problems with Shimrra's infiltrators in the past and with all of you being such prominent figures, we don't want to take any chances."
"Not at all, great one," Yu'shaa inclined his head. "I will treasure this chance to earn your trust."
"At least you have not become senile in your new found freedom," Nen Yim scoffed, but she too nodded in understanding.
"Taan, Nen Yim wished to meet the new Domain Leader for Domain Rin," Tahiri gestured. "Naazar and Ahsi wanted to examine the *Veila*. And Yu'shaa wished an audience with the representatives of the Supreme Council."
"That can all be arranged," Taan said, her hands held amicably at her sides. "Ne'rai Rin could definitely benefit from learning from one so experienced as Nen Yim." Taan looked to the older Master Shaper. "You will be interested to know that Domain Rin has absorbed several smaller Shaping Domains and has become one of the leading forces in our new society. Without any restrictions set upon them by the Supreme Overlord, the shapers are forging ahead with several advancements in our biots."
"Interesting," Nen Yim said noncommittally. However, like Naazar earlier, her eyes seemed to shine at the chance to practice her craft unimpeded by lies and restrictions.
"If you will come with us, Master Shaper," one of the groups of warriors accompanying Taan gestured. "We will take you to Domain Rin's Miid ro'ik."
"By your leave then, Supreme Leader," Nen Yim inclined her head politely and then followed the warriors onto a nearby shuttle-analog.
"At this moment, most of the Caretakers have been spread amongst the different ships in this convoy," Taan said to Yu'shaa. "It will take too much effort to convene them, so if you wish to meet the others, it will have to be after we have reached Zonama Sekot. There are, however, a quarter of the Supreme Council present aboard this vessel and we will be honored to meet one as brave as you."
"Thank you, Supreme Leader," Yu'shaa simpered. "My people have struggled long and hard on Coruscant, and it will be a relief to know that their plight has not been forgotten."
"In the meantime, Tahiri, am I correct to assume that you and Shaeri wish to visit the *Veila* with the others?"
"Your wisdom is great, Supreme Leader," Tahiri grinned.
"And will you need an escort?"

Tahiri glanced at Ahsi and Naazar, then shook her head. "No, Shaeri and I will be fine."
"Then the *Veila* is two berthing bays over," Taan gestured. "I believe that Danni and Kadat are aboard her now ready to present her like proud parents."
Tahiri laughed. "Okay, we'll be there shortly. Come on, Ahsi, Naazar. I think you'll like the *Veila.* Yu'shaa, will you and your people be fine meeting with Taan and the others by yourselves?"
Yu'shaa smiled benevolently. "But of course. We all desire a free people, and we have much to discuss. Besides, we will be well guarded. What could possibly go wrong?"
0-[VII]-0 0-[VII]-0
"Anyone else fed up with this Zhat Lah?" Wedge glanced about at the holo-images of the other ship captains. He received nods of agreement all around. They had been yanked out of hyperspace yet again and lost another ship to the hit-and-run tactics of their pursuer; one who had dogged them relentlessly all the way from Fondor. "Unfortunately, we can't afford to make a full stop to deal with him. General Panib and the others can't afford the delay. I'm open to suggestions."
"I have one," Dukat Gray said.
"Go ahead."
"The Hapans are numerous enough that we can hold our own against this Vong commander. Yet we are not so numerous that our absence will greatly hurt the reinforcements we are bringing to the Bakurans and Hutts. Next time we encounter Zhat, let my people handle his forces and continue on with the rest to Duro."
Having been alerted to the other fleet's situation by Yaqeel via Valin, Wedge's reinforcements had adjusted their plans after the last Yuuzhan Vong interdiction. Wedge thought about Aleson's proposal, and nodded slowly."That could work, Dukat. You won't have any backup if things go sideways though."
"Understood. Not to worry, General Antilles. These Yuuzhan Vong will not last long against the might of Hapes' best. They have never faced a commander such as me before."
Wedge silently counted backwards from ten. What had sounded like a good plan at first suddenly seemed like a disaster in the making. Next to him Yaqeel had to duck her head to hide her disbelieving smile, which definitely wasn't any help for him. There was little he could do. With Zhat Lah hounding them, every jump was turning into a delay they couldn't afford. From Yaqeel's reports it didn't sound like the allied fleets at Duro would last too much longer. "Be careful then, Dukat. I

think the Queen Mother would be extremely displeased with me should anything happen to the Hapan ships in my command."
"Have faith, general. Go and reinforce the Bakurans, we Hapans will make our stand here."
Aleson's hologram flickered out and the Hapan vessels began to detach themselves from the rest of the fleet. The other holograms all looked extremely dubious.
"Maybe Leia and I will stick around," Han said with a sigh. *"You know, just in case."*
"Thanks Han," Wedge chuckled darkly. "Good luck."
"You too Wedge. Falcon out." And Han's hologram deactivated.
Wedge looked to the others. "Alright, continue our course to Duro. Without coralskippers pounding us every time we get dragged out of hyperspace, the journey should be a bit easier."
0-[VIII]-0 0-[VIII]-0
Warmaster Nas Choka bowed low as the villip cluster took on the form of the Supreme Overlord. "Dread One, I hear and obey."
"Warmaster, I am recalling you from the front."
"My lord?"
"Matters have come to my attention that require your immediate action. Leave your current campaign to a subordinate and return to Yuuzhan'tar."
Nas Choka blinked. "My lord, I do not understand. My campaign is nearly completely. I have nearly secured all of what the infidels call the 'Inner Rim' for the Yuuzhan Vong. What could be more pressing than to carve out a safe zone for our people?"
"This war has dragged on for far too long, Warmaster Choka. You and all Supreme Commanders are being recalled to plan one final strike against the Galactic Alliance."
"You wish us to attack their planet, Mon Calamari?"
"Astute as ever, Warmaster. Yes, their capitol shall be your next target. This war can either drag on for decades or end with decisive blows against their most valued targets. Mon Calamari shall be the beginning of the end."
"Dread Lord, I do not question your plan, or the soundness of it, merely the timing. If I am given just one more year, we will be in a position to launch our final offensive…"
"Warmaster, you have your orders. Return with your most distinguished warriors and vessels, they will be needed for this death blow."
"I obey, Dread Lord," Nas Choka swallowed, unable to keep the confusion from his face. He knew that Shimrra was no fool when it

came to tactical maneuvering, that the Supreme Overlord had an abundance of experience against many foes. Why then was the leader of their race ignoring common sense and pushing for this deep strike when their borders were far from secure was something Nas Choka did not know. But as the commander of the Yuuzhan Vong forces he had a duty to the Supreme Overlord and he would follow his instructions. Perhaps Shimrra knew something he did not.
Yes, that must be it, Nas Choka mentally concurred. Perhaps the Supreme Overlord, in all his infinite wisdom, had come into information that would truly end the war.
Nas Choka clasped a fist over his chest and held the position until the villip inverted itself with a sigh.
"Helmsman, set course for Yuuzhan'tar. Have the following vessels accompany us. We have been summoned by the Supreme Overlord himself."

0-[IX]-0 0-[IX]-0

"The Avatar of Yun-Shuno has communicated to us a great many things about your movement," Taan said, reclined on a polyp bed of red and orange. She, like the other representatives of the Supreme Council, was in the specially grown room aboard the *Blessed by the Jedi,* designed to hold conferences in comfort. "And our own people on Coruscant many more."
"There is not much to say, Supreme Leader, noble Caretakers," Yu'shaa said, a hand moving to his chest in a gesture of modesty. "My loyal followers and I all want the same thing, to be rid of Shimrra and to be free of the oppression which has burdened our shoulders for many hundreds of years. I am but the voice of the gods, their mouthpiece, my disciples and the *Jeedai* are the ones who have made everything possible."
"Indeed," Taan said patiently. "There is one matter that has come to our attention that has concerned us, however."
"Oh?" Yu'shaa seemed to freeze on his own polyp bed.
"Yes," Taan gestured to his face. "Your masquer."
"I wear it to show my devotion to the gods," Yu'shaa said with a hesitant smile. "I would take it off, but most find my visage highly displeasing and vomit inducing. I was one of the test experiments the Shapers used their voxyn acid on. Apparently I was too attractive for someone so Shamed. The gods blessed me with this masquer and allowed my life to continue on in their service."
"That may be the case," Taan said slowly. "But you must understand our caution. Brave men and women have died due to Shimrra's agents, and we have no wish for any of our leaders to lie to our people like

Shimrra has. There have also been reports from our people within your movement that rivals and threats to your powers have the tendency to be caught up in raids by Shimrra's forces. Places once safe are suddenly flooded with Shimrra loyalists, and smaller groups that might have drawn away your followers or drawn attention to your group are suddenly snuffed out."
"What can I say?" Yu'shaa said, his hesitant smile now forced. A hand instinctively dug into his robes and fingered the cool metal vial. "The gods do as they will."
Taan bowed her head for a moment, taking a small breath. When she looked up, her eyes were gentle. "Yu'shaa, it does not matter to us who you were in your past life under Shimrra. To speak frankly, provided your actions harm no one, it does not matter to us if you serve Shimrra still. What does matter is that you are given a chance to see that a future without Shimrra's death grip *is* possible. That the Yuuzhan Vong still *have* a future when this war is over. We have traveled for a very long time, warred for even longer than that. Shimrra's ways are no longer self-sustainable. In the next two days it will take us to reach Zonama Sekot, hopefully you will be able to see that a life of peace is not as much a dream as you might have once thought."
At that Yu'shaa was truly stunned speechless. "You…you cannot be serious?"
"All of us here, at one time or another, served Shimrra. Whether out of choice because we believed only he had the strength to lead or people, or due to force, we did his bidding. Before you ask, yes, we have some suspicion as to who you were before you took on the guise of Yu'shaa, but like the Supreme Leader has said, it does not matter," an older Caretaker spoke.
"You will find that things a run a bit differently than what occurred under Shimrra the Deceiver." Yu'shaa's surprise at seeing the former High Prefect Drathul on the Supreme Council was only topped by the High Prefect speaking those words. "Free thought is allowed, as is the exchange of information. Though the current Supreme Council is far from being flawless, it is a system competent enough for the moment. When we reach Zonama Sekot, no doubt things will change once more. But they will be changes for the better. The Yuuzhan Vong have not fallen apart just because the Shamed Ones no longer obey Shimrra. We have not all died just because a great many priests have renounced the gods and joined this movement. The lies have taken us this far, now it is time to build a now society based on truth."
"All of you shame me with your words," Yu'shaa swallowed after a moment. His eyes darted towards each of the twenty-one individuals in

the room as he slowly released the vial he had been grasping. "I will endeavor to prove myself worthy of your trust. I will admit that I used to be a member of Shimrra's inner-circle and that I have fallen out of favor with him. But I too have realized that the Yuuzhan Vong cannot continue this warring cycle. My devotion to my followers is genuine. I sought out Zonama Sekot because I too wished to see if the rumors were true."
Taan smiled kindly. "We are glad to hear that, Yu'shaa. If you wish, we will take you on a brief tour of our ships. We have livestock and many plants ready to be transplanted to our new homeworld. Many warriors have given up their amphistaffs in hope of a life of peace. Intendant Caste members have also been instrumental in keeping our new government running. This truly will be a new Yuuzhan Vong and we hope you find it in your heart to join us."
Yu'shaa blinked repeatedly, finally bowing his head. "The gods truly are wise and all knowing. I would be honored to see this new future you tout, and see if it is the future the gods have showed me in my dreams."
Taan gestured to several Yuuzhan Vong who had entered the room. "Then go with Shakh'al Lah and Phaa Anor. There is much to see."
Yu'shaa froze momentarily at the sight of Phaa Anor, before inclining his head once more and smiling. "As you command, Supreme Leader."
0-[X]-0 0-[X]-0
When Yu'shaa left the room, the small representation of the Supreme Council exchanged nervous looks. "Are you sure what we did was wise? His reaction after seeing myself and Phaa Anor, combined with the intelligence our agents have gathered on Coruscant, leaves no doubt that this Yu'shaa is indeed our missing Executor. He is too dangerous to be left alone."
"We need to at least try to convince him that the old government is a dying beast," Taan addressed Drathul. "Nom Anor may be a despicable character, but his mind is sharp. Better to have that mind on our side than serving Shimrra. As one of my instructors once taught me, unless you are certain of a kill, you never trap a dangerous animal."
"And what makes you think that the Executor will even defect?" Drathul pressed. "He is even more dangerous since we've also left him with Phaa, another whose loyalty is in question."
"It will be his choice, Caretaker Drathul," Taan replied. "We will not force him to serve us, or imprison him for what he *might* do in the future. That is Shimrra's way. We learn nothing from killing or imprisoning him now. What we *will* do is watch, watch and learn his intentions. Will he choose to side with his traitorous cousin, Phaa? Or

with the Freed One Shakh'al? Who knows? Maybe his presence onboard our ship will flush out other agents of Shimrra."
"I agree," Caretaker for Domain Fath, an Intendant Caste based Domain, acknowledged. "For all of his schemes, Nom Anor always did do what was best for Nom Anor. If we can show him that we are a viable alternative for the Yuuzhan Vong, that Shimrra is months away from downfall, then he will throw his lot in with us. His future, like it always has been, is in his hands."
0-[XI]-0 0-[XI]-0
"This…this is…" Tahiri hid her smile as Ahsi gazed upon the *Veila* in complete disbelief. "How can this…"
"An abomination," Naazar stammered.
"Hey! She can understand you, you know," Danni Quee called out, emerging from the metal ramp of the hybrid vessel. "Hi, Tahiri."
"Danni." Tahiri beamed.
"The *Veila*'s finished growing," Danni pointed out unnecessarily, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet.
"So I've noticed, can we come aboard?"
"That's up to the *Veila*," Danni laughed, patting the organic shell-like coral pieces of the outside of the ship. "She's a lot like you, Tahiri. Temperamental but loyal to her friends. She's a hundred percent her own being. Speaking of, who are the Yuuzhan Vong with you? I mean, I know Shaeri, but a priest and a shaper?"
"Oh," Tahiri gestured. "This is High Priest Naazar. Well, former high priest anyways."
Naazar tilted his head slightly. "You are the creator of this vessel?"
"I helped. There's also Kadat and a whole team of engineers and shapers who made her possible," Danni looked to Tahiri's 'adopted' little sister. "Kadat's in the cockpit, Shaeri, if you want to catch up. The two of you have come far since your days as Shamed Ones."
Shaeri smiled. "We have indeed. Tahiri, if you do not mind?"
"Go ahead," Tahiri patted her shoulder and the Freed One entered the ship ahead of her. Looking back to Danni, she finished the introductions. "This is Ahsi Yim, sister to Nen Yim, the one who helped Shaped me."
No sooner had she said that than a retractable turret suddenly emerged from the *Veila* and took aim. Both Danni and Tahiri's eyes widened in surprise.
"No *Veila*! She's a friend!" Tahiri called out loudly in near panic. Tahiri never thought she'd see an automated turret droop in disappointment, but the moment she had identified Ahsi as a friend,

the gun aimed towards the ground with an audible whine and then seemed to reluctantly retract back into the ship.
"Like I said a hundred percent her own being," Danni said with a faint, nervous grin. "Maybe you should use one of the cognition hoods to help explain to the *Veila* some more. She's a learning girl after all."
"Amazing," Ahsi whispered, stepping towards the ship; seemingly uncaring that she had been seconds away from being atomized.
Tahiri placed a hand on Ahsi's shoulder. "Why don't you let me and Shaeri go in first?"
Ahsi shook herself from her awed trance. "Of course, right."
Tahiri rolled her eyes. "I think you and Danni will get along great. She can tell you how the *Veila* was made while you wait."
Wasting no time, Ahsi immediately whirled around to the other blond and began rattling off a series of questions. The words were incomprehensible to Tahiri, but Danni seemed to have no problem and responded in the same technical and shaper-based jargon as if she had been doing so her entire life. Both seemed to have matching, excitable gleams in their eyes as they gestured to different areas of the ship.
Tahiri empathized with the warrior priest's bewildered expression.
"Come on, Naazar."
"Your ship will not try to kill me too?"
"Why would she do that?"
"I called her an abomination."
"Well, if she's anything like me, she'll accept an apology. We've been called worse before," Tahiri said the words calmly as she stared pointedly into the ship.
Naazar blinked, and took a hesitant step forward. "I apologize…ship. I am not accustomed to having my beliefs challenged more than once in my life time. Old habits are…hard…to overcome."
"See, she didn't blast you to bits, now come on," Tahiri said, patting the warrior priest affectionately on the shoulder as the ship emitted a small trill from inside the vessel.
The older Yuuzhan Vong raised his brow in incredulity. Here he was, a supposedly feared and terrifying member of Yun-Yammka's warrior sect, being reassured by a human girl not even a third his age about a ship that was probably smarter than him. His head hurt just thinking about it. Still, he dutifully followed the teen onto the ship, warily glancing at the computers embedded within pulsating organic walls.
Though he wasn't as appreciative of the Shaping and mechanical aspects of the vessels as the shaper and scientists were, he had to admit that there was no better ship for the avatar of Yun-Shuno than one that went against everything Shimrra and the priests believed in.

Tahiri glanced back over her shoulder at the suddenly silent High Priest and smiled gently. "What do you think about her, now that you've actually had time to think it over?"
"This ship…if the rumors of Zonama Sekot are true, then she could very well be an offspring of the sentient planet in spirit."
"I've never thought of it that way," Tahiri glanced about the *Veila* whimsically as they entered the central chamber. She could hear Shaeri in the cockpit happily taking with the ship and Kadat as if they had been long lost friends, and it made her smile softly. "Anakin decided to have her created for me as a 'just because' gift. To tell you the truth I actually think it was more the challenge of building her that appealed to him than gifting her to me. But when my mind first touched the *Veila*, it was so strange, but welcoming too. If you will allow it, will you let her skim your mind so she can understand your viewpoints better?"
Naazar looked at the holographic interface and computers in the center of the room, electrical outlets linked up to organic nerve-like clusters in transparent sheaths. "I…I think I will. One of the problems with our people is that we all must keep our thoughts to ourselves. It is Shimrra's way or death. If you are killed, all your thoughts, who you were, die with you."
Tahiri reached over and placed one of the cognition hoods onto her own head, and Naazar took a seat next to her and placed another one onto his.
Outside of the vessel, Ahsi continued to anxiously glanced at the entrance of the *Veila*, obviously willing to risk life and limb to see the inside of the ship.
"I have agreed with Tahiri not to kill you, Ahsi Yim," the ship's external speakers broadcasted in Yuuzhan Vong.
Ahsi's eyes grew round, not at the words, but at the mere fact that the ship was indeed as sentient as Danni had been describing. "Please… *Veila*, will you let me aboard? You are everything the shapers have been taught to ignore, to despise. A perfect blending of our two galaxies."
The *Veila* sounded both confused and amused. *"I will let you come aboard, sister."*
"Sister?" Ahsi blinked, and then began to mutter. "Of course, your bond-partner must have been Tahiri. Your first memory impression will have been based off of her experiences. Her values are yours, though you have probably developed your own set given how sentient you appear to be. I wonder how the organic and synthetic components

added or hindered your sentience and whether or not you are actually yourself or two different personalities working in unison."
"Tahiri was right, all scientists, Yuuzhan Vong or otherwise, are weird. You always talk to yourselves."
"Hey!" Danni said, mock glaring at the ship. "I helped put you together with my weird science."
"Weird in a good way, Creator Quee," The *Veila* hastily added. The *Veila*'s voice seemed to grow deeper with more maturity as she spoke again. "*You and Ahsi Yim are welcome aboard."*
"*Veila*?" Ahsi tilted her head.
"*I apologize, I am currently interfacing with Naazar, Tahiri, Shaeri, and Creator Kadat. Thought processes and logic circuits shifting to accommodate new knowledge."*
"It's okay, she does that sometimes," Danni said fondly. "Mostly when trying to absorb some sort of emotional information or analyzing memories. We're not quite sure, but we think it's because the logical part of her personality is being supplemented by the droid brain Anakin designed and it can't quite quantify the emotions the organic part of her mind is experiencing. Her complete personality uses both the droid brain and ship-mind, but emotional influxes shut off the droid brain for the ship-mind to mature. So, it is kind of like you said, two personalities working in unison. One handles emotion and empathy better, the other is better with logic."
"That makes some sense," Ahsi agreed as they hesitantly approached the ship's ramp. When no drop-down blaster appeared, they entered the vessel. "This vessel truly is a wonder of Yun-Ne'shel and Yun-Shuno. What I wouldn't have given to be able to design something like her, to transcend the cortexes available to us."
"Well, you can do that now," Danni said sympathetically. "Without any of Shimrra's restrictions, you can Shape for the good of your people now and help change this galaxy for the better."
Ahsi reverently ran her hand along the pulsating organic walls of the interior of the ship. She could see cables running beneath some of the thinner membranes, and the metal frame if she looked hard enough. The soft organic growls combined with the steady beeping of the computers in a chorus that she had never heard or dreamed of hearing before. Impossibility, she was touching impossibility with her fingertips. Impossibility made into flesh, made into hope.
"Yes," Ahsi whispered, tears forming in her eyes. "After so long, after so many years of fear and uncertainty, just maybe I can finally and truly be able to help my people. And when we arrive on Zonama Sekot, the future my sister and I have dreamed of will finally be realized."

0-[XII]-0 0-[XII]-0

"Master Shaper, you honor us."

There was a first for everything. For Nen Yim, this was one of the first times she was struck silent in awe. To put it simply, the Miid Ro'ik, *Shaper's Cradle*, was a Shaping paradise. Shapers from a wide range of domains were working on various projects; for once free of the threat of death should they fail. And if there was one thing clear about all of the projects it was that they alone could have filled Shimrra's eighth cortex, maybe even a ninth cortex as well. Free from their restrictions, shapers were inventing new techniques, short-cuts, analyzing mechanical technology to try and get Yuuzhan Vong biots to mimic their affects.

During her tour of the vessel she had seen entire rooms devoted to making food crops grow in greater abundance, experiments on the creatures that made up damuteks to get them to change shapes and sizes, an attempt to grow a yorik-et without any of its plasma cannons, and many more.

Nen Yim couldn't help but wonder if she had died and the gods had finally rewarded her with such a place. She felt like a little girl again, told that she could do any and everything her mind set itself to do. There was no doubting that it would take an entire army to tear her from the ship. But of course, as a Master Shaper, she could scarcely show any of her excitement. She had to retain at least *some* dignity.

"Save your honor," Nen Yim finally managed to vocalize, having completed a small, impromptu lecture about how to bypass a dovin basal to make it immune to interdiction. "Honor is for those who deserve it. All I have taught you is what any simple-minded adept would have been able to figure out had they ignored the teachings of the seven cortexes."

The shaper adepts, an entire class of them from several of the smaller Shaping domains, bowed their heads respectfully. "We will remember that, Master Shaper." They shuffled off back to their duties.

"We have entire generations of people to un-train," the Master Shaper of Domain Rin, Ne'rai Rin, said solemnly.

Nen Yim glanced at the younger shaper, who so reminded her of herself at that young age. The fact that the younger shaper was also involved with a warrior from another domain, the avatar of Yun-Harla's former pilot, made that resemblance all the stronger. Nen Yim felt an odd determination to see to it that this younger shaper had all the opportunities she did not. "We do indeed, Adept."

Ne'rai flinched at the demotion, but didn't react otherwise.

"No argument?"

"None, Master Shaper. I know that I am hardly skilled enough to claim the title of Master Shaper. It was only the fact that the other Master Shapers of my domain were stuck in their old ways that the avatar of Yun-Harla saw fit to advance me. I am willing to learn anything you might be able to teach me so that I may rightfully carry the title."
Nen Yim nodded in approval. "Very well. Until we arrive on Zonama Sekot, I shall instruct you on what I have learned. Perhaps you can share with myself some of Domain Rin's Shaping techniques as well."
"Thank you, Master Shaper," Ne'rai said politely.
Nen Yim glanced about the various activities going on in the many chambers below her. Though she had felt a small spark of hope when Tahiri had described the state of Domain Rin, never in her wildest imaginations could she envision shapers from so many domains working together to better their race. As foolish as the idea of a Supreme Council was, there was no denying that the Yuuzhan Vong were on the verge of a new golden age of knowledge and prosperity.
The Master Shaper kept her face impassive as she glanced at the younger shaper at her side.
"Let us continue our efforts then. The war is not over and we have much to do."

0-[XIII]-0 0-[XIII]-0

Nom Anor was a nervous wreck, not that any looking at him could tell. For all appearance and purposes, he was Yu'shaa, happily enjoying a tour of the *Blessed by the Jedi* and learning about the 'freedom' now in the hands of the Shamed and the lower ranking warriors. Even the defecting Intendants and the few shapers he had seen seemed in a blissful daze as they greeted him warmly and happily. As he half listened to the blatherings of his guide, some disgrace of a warrior named Shakh'al Lah, he focused on his cousin and the people Phaa Anor was interacting with.
Nom Anor had known that Phaa had been sent off on one of the Supreme Overlord's secret missions. When he saw Phaa emerge in the company of the Freed One's 'Supreme Council,' Nom Anor understood what that mission had been. But whether Phaa was playing along or had actually switched sides was something that Nom Anor did not yet know. And in his current predicament, Nom Anor needed all the allies and pawns he could gather.
Garagh and Kunra, his loyal followers and bodyguards, followed behind him in their small tour group. But he could hardly rely on either of them. Both were apparently enamored with the offers of freedom and a brighter future for all and would be of little use to him. The fact that

the Supreme Council no doubt suspected his true identity didn't make things any easier for Nom Anor.
Of course, he could take the easy way. Admit that he had seen the error of his ways, join the Supreme Council, and regain his power in Yuuzhan Vong society in that manner. But just watching the so-called 'free' Yuuzhan Vong sickened him. They knew he might be a threat, yet left him to his own devices. They were fighting a war and yet were already focusing on settling down. Was this what he had spent his years among the infidels for? For peace and happiness?
There was no doubt that if the war was over, so too was his relevance. He was not a warrior, but a schemer who planned the downfall of others far stronger than himself. If he managed to pull his current scheme off, he would have his place once again at Shimrra's side. Shimrra who would ensure that the Yuuzhan Vong remained united under one cause, under one voice. Shimrra who would keep the Yuuzhan Vong strong and ever vigilant for any future threat. Shimrra who would ensure that there was always intrigue and enemies to topple, would ensure Nom Anor's own place in the galaxy. Without the Supreme Overlord, what was Nom Anor but just another scheming member of the Intendant caste?
Nom Anor watched with feigned interest as Yuuzhan Vong crèchelings learned not the amphistaff and martial arts drilled into them, but how to grow plants and live a life of peace. The instructors were a mix of Yuuzhan Vong and various other species, from the Remnant and other parts of the galaxy. This was not the Yuuzhan Vong Empire that he had envisioned when he first began his infiltration mission.
Sure the continuous cycle of fighting and violence was detrimental to any civilization, but the Yuuzhan Vong had endured it for millennia, had become all the stronger for it.
Supporting Shimrra was *still* the only way the Yuuzhan Vong could survive and retain their culture and what it meant to be Yuuzhan Vong; Nom Anor was certain of that. Shimrra's continued rule was the only way *he* could survive. And in order to get back into Shimrra's good graces, he had to eliminate any threat to his power.
As he smiled and greeted a young Yuuzhan Vong with a benevolent pat on the head, his other hand dipped back into his robes and gripped the vial, his salvation. He would wait until they were on Zonama Sekot to unleash its contents, ensuring that he dealt a death blow to both the Freed One leadership and the heretical planet that would destabilize everything Shimrra had created, destabilize what millions of Yuuzhan Vong had already died fighting for.

Soon. Soon everything—his fortunes, his future, the fate of his people—would change. It might not be a change for the better, but it was for the best. He released the vial once more and continued to play the role of repentant war veteran who had seen the light. Soon he wouldn't have to pretend anymore and he would be back at Shimrra's side ruling over all that he deserved.

0-[Chapter End]-0

A\N: Saturday for next update. Please review if you so desire =).

On an unrelated note, I'm thinking of shutting down the aDA forum this weekend after the Saturday update. It kind of ended up as I feared it would, with only two or three people in it with it being pretty dead after two or so comments. A part of it is probably my fault for not knowing how to keep a forum from dying, but since the story will end in four weeks' time, the forum would have lost its purpose anyways. Oh well, it was fun while it lasted...

ADA 57

Fifty-Seven

0-[I]-0 0-[I]-0

"Zonama Sekot!" Excitement electrified the air as the small flotilla of Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessels dropped out of hyperspace in the system of the living planet. "The rumors were true!"

"We are truly free now."

"The gods have been with us, no doubt about that."

The babble of energetic and eager conversation continued all across the fleet as the Yuuzhan Vong pressed themselves against viewing membranes or buried themselves in the senses of various cognition hoods. As if in greeting, a small vanguard of organic vessels rose up from the planet and spread themselves out in two columns, creating a pathway for the approaching ships. Streamer-like ribbons danced in an invisible breeze as these similar-yet-different-from-the-Yuuzhan-Vong vessels flitted about almost playfully. Several of the larger ships took the lead, waggling their ray-like wings and guiding the Yuuzhan Vong fleet through the small honor-guard of living vessels.

Tears fell freely from some of the older Yuuzhan Vong as the planet neared. They could feel it in their very bones, the sight they never thought that they would see in their life time, home.

Tahiri, Shaeri, Ahsi, Naazar, Danni, and Kadat all looked upon the planet for the first time from the cockpit of the *Veila*. Their expressions were of pure awe, of disbelief, as they blinked wildly in hopes that

what they were seeing wasn't some vision conjured up by delirious dream.
"Zonama Sekot, she does exist," Ahsi whispered reverently. "I had always hoped…but to see it for my own eyes."
"Unbelievable," Naazar shook his head. He reached up to his face and was surprised to find himself crying in joy. "I can almost feel it. The lifeforce of the planet reverberates through me. It truly is a place touched by the gods."
"*Receiving incoming message from one of the organic ships that's come to greet us. They are using a frequency similar to the ones the villips use."*
"Thanks *Veila*," Tahiri said aloud, stroking the vessel's villip cluster.
The face of Jaina Solo appeared. "*Hey Tahiri, Shaeri, Danni…and friends. Zonama Sekot welcomes you all. Follow the rest of the procession and Sekot will greet you personally."*
"Sekot?"
"*The planet's Zonama, the consciousness is Sekot. She, it, has been just as excited as the Yuuzhan Vong must be to have them over. I'll explain more later. For now, welcome to a brighter future."*
The flotilla dipped into the atmosphere, and the living ships that had guided them broke off in wondrous displays of acrobatics. Taking their place were flocks of brightly colored birds of all shapes and sizes, calling out in a cacophony of welcoming trills and caws. Below, the tampasi was filled with the natural chorus of the wildlife as they sensed the arrival of the countless lifeforms coming down from the sky. The boras swayed back and forth, waving their branches up at the passing Yuuzhan Vong vessels in welcome. While a myriad of creatures peeked up at the alien vessels in innocent curiosity.
Airships full of blue-skinned, golden-eyed people drew up alongside the fleet and coasted with them. From the tops of these living ships, children waved energetically and threw small handfuls of what Tahiri had thought were confetti. On closer inspection, however, she realized that the confetti was actually iridescent butterfly-like insects which took flight and glinted beautifully in the sunlight.
Their escorts appeared to be taking them on a tour of the planet as they coasted over fertile plains, streaming rivers, and natural mountain ranges. A vast expanse of ocean rushed by beneath them, with schools of fish leaping out of the water and diving back in. They passed over villages belonging to the blue-skinned people, who in turn waved up at them before returning to their duties. There was no mistaking the vibrant life that suffused the entire planet, the harmony of it all.

"I'm no Jedi," Danni whispered in hushed awe. "But even I can feel the Force here. It's amazing."
Tahiri just nodded faintly, nearly overwhelmed by the sensations bombarding her. It was just a planet full of life, full of hope, full of the Force, and she really had nothing to compare it to. Dagobah, as powerful a place as it was, was like the flame of a candle competing against the brilliance of a sun. Her senses were enhanced in every way by the warmth and strength of her surroundings, her connection to the Force on a scale she had never felt before.
All too quickly, the planetary tour was over, and the mass of ships were all directed back into orbit.
"*Shuttles and smaller craft can start your approach now, Sekot is sending the coordinates to your ship brains so let your ships guide you,"* Jaina announced over a fleet-wide transmission.
Tahiri and Shaeri exchanged eager smiles as the *Veila* began its final descent into the planet's atmosphere. Ahsi and Danni's eyes appeared glued to the viewport as they once again took another look at the diverse array of life present on the planet.
"That settles it, I'm definitely staying here," Danni laughed.
"Any doubts I had now seem foolish," Ahsi laughed along with her. "This place, not Coruscant, is truly Yuuzhan'tar reincarnate."
The coordinates the *Veila* had received was a vast open field by a winding river that disappeared up into a nearby range of mountains. Hundreds of shuttles analogs, small picketships, coralskippers, and dropships of all types descended down onto the field in an organized chaos. Sekot had taken over the standard role of a yammosk and was skillfully guiding each ship to its own berth on the tall blades of waving grass.
As the first vessels touched down and ramps were lowered or hatches opened, the Yuuzhan Vong set foot on Zonama Sekot in timid, almost fragile steps. Several simply dropped to their knees and closed their eyes in silent prayer as the breeze gently washed upon their skin. Their solemn and heartfelt greeting to the planet was contrasted with the Yuuzhan Vong children; who eagerly ran out ahead of their minders, laughing as they darted through the tall grass in an impromptu game of tag.
More Yuuzhan Vong stepped forth, most still in stunned disbelief. They took their first few steps, awestruck and with a maelstrom of feelings rushing through them—amazement at finally finding a living planet they could call their own, sorrow at those who died and would never know the sights or the future now available to them, anger at Shimrra as his lies were made all the more physical as they walked around the

open field as if in a trance. Every cell in their bodies resonated with the planet, as if their entire being just *knew* that they belonged to this world they had never stepped foot on.
The crew of the *Veila* disembarked their vessel and their wonder-filled reactions mirrored the expressions on those next to them.
"Zonama Sekot," Ahsi breathed in a deep lungful of the crisp air
"Who would have thought we would be standing here?" Naazar whispered, running his hands along the blades of grass by his side as he slowly turned in a circle to survey the alien world. "Here, breathing the air of a living planet. I feel…I do not have the words to describe it"
"We're home," Shaeri summed up her own emotions with a tearfully happy smile. She looked to her human friend with excited eyes. "We're home, Tahiri. I can feel it. We're home. *I'm* home."
Tahiri wrapped the younger Yuuzhan Vong teen in a one armed hug, basking in the powerful Force presence of the planet's consciousness. "If any people deserve this place, it is definitely the Yuuzhan Vong."
"It was all made possible by you and the Jedi," Taan spoke up, her expression vibrant as she strode through the wonder-struck crowd. "We would never have seen this with our own eyes if you hadn't showed us how to stand up for ourselves."
A small, focused, gust of wind whipped through the field, and when the gust was over, a blue-skinned, golden-eyed individual was standing before them. "Welcome, my children. I welcome you all to Zonama."
"Sekot?" Danni tilted her head.
"Indeed," the golden-eyed speaker said with a smile.
Almost as one, most of the Yuuzhan Vong dropped down to their knees in reverence.
"Please, my children, do not bow," Sekot seemed slightly bewildered. "I am no deity."
"Nice to know I'm not the only one who has that problem," Tahiri mumbled under her breath. She glanced to her side and saw that Shaeri was one of those bowing. "Shaeri!"
"She's a planet!" The Yuuzhan Vong Freed One retorted in a low voice. "She's even more powerful than the Avatar of Yun-Shuno. How else was I supposed to greet her?"
"Like a regular person?"
Shaeri had an expression of abject horror at that idea. "Tahiri!"
"Are you going to be doing this to every super-powered being you encounter?"
"Unless I'm convinced they won't disintegrate me with their mystic powers first," Shaeri nodded. "Bowing never hurts. Besides, after a planet, how many other super-powered beings can there be? It's not

like there's a living embodiment of your light side of your Force, or your dark side…right?"
While Tahiri and Shaeri carried on their hushed conversation, which was rather loud considering they were the only ones talking, some of the others cautiously approached Sekot's form.
Taan stepped forward. "Thank you for the greeting Sekot. And thank you for agreeing to give us shelter, a place of our own."
"It is no bother. I do not know why, but I am feeling a certain kinship to all of you," Sekot said gently. "I more than look forward to discovering why and to learning more about your people."
"And we our connection to you," Taan agreed. "It is no coincidence that we continue to find you, even galaxies away. No coincidence that your sentience mirrors that of our own home planet lost to our warring ways. But I think, thanks to the Jedi, we will have more than enough to learn from each other."
"Indeed," Sekot smiled. "In the meantime, feel free to begin setting up your settlement here. Anakin Solo and the other Jedi on this planet have already picked out several locations they believed your people would find most suitable for your needs. This current location was meant to be the location of your new capital city."
Taan and the other glanced around the area, sensing the vibrant life pulsing beneath their feet and in the air around them. Taan returned Sekot's genuine smile. "It's perfect." She looked to her people. "Let it be known in the stories we pass down to our children and our children's children; today is the day the Yuuzhan Vong have returned to Yuuzhan'tar. After so many centuries of traveling, of warfare, disease, and famine, today is the day our people have found our place in this galaxy, have found a home."
0-[II]-0 0-[II]-0
After Taan's declaration, the cries of jubilation and praises to the gods continued to surrounded Tahiri, and though she was likewise amazed at the living planet she now stood on, it wasn't her primary care at the moment.
She could *sense* him. *Feel* him in every ounce of her being as he drew nearer. As abundant in the Force as the planet was, as incredible as her past travels had been, they all seemed to fade in the background as her heart soared in response to his proximity. They had only been apart for a couple of months, but it seemed like an entire lifetime. She turned around, her green eyes searching the celebratory crowd all around.
And then she *saw* him. Her lips quirked upwards in a broad smile as she took off running, bare feet trampling the blades of tall grass as she

called on the Force to increase her speed. She ran by countless shuttles and ships, well-wishers praising her name, a herd of animals being unloaded from another vessel. Everything went by in a blur.
"Anakin!" She called out, joy in every syllable.
She leaped the final few steps, and he effortlessly caught her, spinning her around and holding her close. Her name left his lips and Tahiri closed her eyes, unable to believe how much she had missed hearing it. This was her best friend, her family, her everything.
He set her on the ground, cupping her face with the utmost of care as sparkling blue eyes drank her in. "Force, I missed you, Tahiri."
Tahiri nodded, eyes shimmering as her stomach swooped with emotion. "Then kiss me already, dummy!"
He did as commanded, their lips meeting in a tender, but fierce and loving kiss. Their Force bond flared and, enhanced by the power of Zonama Sekot, surrounded them in a golden nimbus of energy. Neither cared who could feel their emotions, who was watching, as they clung to one and other. They were back together, and that was all that mattered.
Even those few months apart had been far too long.
Their lips parted, and they rested their foreheads against one and other, breathing heavily and just gazing at the other as they communicated their emotions through the Force. Love washed away the loneliness, friendship soothing the ache that had developed in their time apart.
"Dumbest idea we've had in a long time," Tahiri muttered in a little-girl voice, her hands squeezing Anakin's tightly, as if afraid that if she let go, he would disappear in the light Sekotian breeze. "Being a part like that. Next time we'll just tell the galaxy to stuff it."
"Agreed," Anakin breathed back, shifting so that he could pull her against him once more. Tahiri offered no resistance, her body quivering as she tried to mould herself against him.
The Force continued to swirl around the young couple, unnoticed by either of them.
For Anakin, the only thing he cared about was the beautiful young woman he was holding in his arms; his best friend and partner through all things good and bad. It was said by some of the older Jedi that absence made the heart grow fonder, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. Her absence had only hurt. It had been an absence that gnawed at him whenever he had a spare moment to reach out across the galaxy to her. In their time apart, worry and fear had competed with a strong desire to just be by her side once more,

and only his complete immersion in preparing Zonama and the Ferroans for the Yuuzhan Vong had kept him sane.
And now that she was in his arms again, well, it would definitely take something a lot greater than an intergalactic war to tear her away for months at a time for a second time.
He could feel her petite form tremble and he bent down to kiss her again. Her emotions traversed their bond, mirroring his own determinations and feelings as she offered him everything she was. Slowly, tenderly caressing her face, they parted again. They just gazed at each other for the longest of moments, their bond strengthening back to its fullest extent, when someone coughed. Both sheepishly broke from their embrace to face the others.
"Nice to see you too, Tahiri," Jaina said, smirking. "Can you two not make the rest of us feel emotionally challenged?"
Tahiri giggled, a slight flush to her checks as she stepped up against Anakin and then turned herself around so that her back was to his front. His arms draped lazily over her shoulder, and she waved brightly at Jaina, Jacen, Mara, Luke, and a whole host of Yuuzhan Vong and Ferroans who had been looking on. "Hi!"
"'Hi' indeed," Mara said wryly. "Glad you made it here safely."
"Huh? 'Here'? Oh right, Zonama Sekot."
"How in the Holy Wampa can you forget about landing on a living planet?" Jacen blinked.
"Your brother's a *really* good kisser," Tahiri answered, tilting her head back up to receive another brief kiss.
"Don't encourage them Jace," Jaina rolled her eyes. "Anyways, Tahiri, introductions? I realized that more people than just you came out of the *Veila*."
"You came on the *Veila?*" Anakin blinked. "Wow, how'd…"
"Amazing," Tahiri said, her bond allowing her to pick up, finish, and answer Anakin's question without him even saying the words. "Do you…"
"Sure… But does…"
"Yeah, it really works. Did you know that…"
"Really? And you're okay with it?"
"Ahem!" Mara cleared her throat for the second time. "Having conversations half in your heads isn't really polite. The introductions?"
"Right," Tahiri finally blushed in full. She promptly introduced the rest of those who had traveled down to the planet with her. "…and he's the former High Priest of Yun-Yammka, Naazar."
"From Hapes?" Mara asked.
"That was not one of my finer moments," Naazar replied evenly.

"We all make mistakes at one time or another," Mara shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, if Tahiri trusts you, I do too."
"Thank you. I am not used to…such trust. A person of my position always had to be on constant look out for those who coveted my title or wanted to hurt the priestly caste through intrigue."
"I know the feeling," Mara empathized. "But if I could get over it, so can you. Come on, there's much to be done."
"Buildings to be raised and cities to be planned," Jacen added. "This, after all, will be the future home of your people."
Nen Yim folded her hands together and tilted her head slightly. "And may it be a bright one indeed."
0-[III]-0 0-[III]-0
"You did not wish to be among the first to set foot on Zonama Sekot?" Kunra asked his revered leader, Yu'shaa.
The Prophet shook his head. "I am not worthy of that honor. Let the children, the elderly, and the infirm go and breathe the air of freedom. Let the leaders of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, the politicians and those who would Shape the future, tread upon that land first. I have and always will be just a messenger of the gods, never to enjoy the same benefits they have shown me our people will have."
"The gods surely cannot be that cruel?" Garagh voiced with a frown.
"Not cruel," the Prophet shook his head. "They gave me the gift of sight, to comfort my old self in knowing that all our struggles and sufferings will not be in vain. That is enough for me. Now, please my friends. Join the next wave to Zonama Sekot's surface. Just because I must be denied entrance to this holiest of realms does not mean that the two of you should share my fate."
"If you are certain," Kunra said reluctantly.
"I am," Yu'shaa gestured to the queues of people. "Please, for me."
Kunra and Garagh exchanged uncertain glances before they bowed lowly and moved off to join the nearest line.
Yu'shaa waved as they soon stepped onto the nearest shuttle and departed for the glittering organic world below.
Once they were gone, he left the hangar bay and made his way towards one of the darker corners of the *Blessed by the Jedi*. It was a supply room, stacked with material yet to be sent to the surface of Zonama Sekot. But waiting there for him was a group of seven other Yuuzhan Vong.
"Good, you are all here," Yu'shaa said smoothly.
"Cousin, I assume you have a good reason for gathering us here," Phaa Anor said darkly. "We are taking a great risk."

"The risk is minimal, everyone is busy moving to the planet's surface. We can afford a few minutes," Nom Anor replied, removing his masquer. "Besides, a few minutes is all we will need."

0-[IV]-0 0-[IV]-0

The planet Corulag, once a glittering regional capital of the High Empire, had foundered during the New Republic era. It had been little more than a dusty backwater by the time the Yuuzhan Vong had arrived. Yet, its people had remained proud and hadn't given in to the demands of the alien invaders. After a brief skirmish, the Yuuzhan Vong plopped a garrison on the planet and installed their own puppet government. Massive slave labor camps, containing most of the planet's population, dotted the planet's surface under the watchful eyes of Yuuzhan overseers.

After Admiral Kre'fey's failed attempt to push towards the planet, the brief moment of rebellion had likewise been squashed. Despite that, the planet itself was relatively unscathed. Save for a few ruined cities, glowing craters, and kilometers of burnt-out bamboo forests, the local Yuuzhan Vong leader and their puppet government seemed more content on letting the criminal element have free reign than actually controlling the planet.

The only ships in the system belonged to Peace Brigade-allied trading vessels, criminals, slavers, and Yuuzhan Vong. The only people walking freely in the sprawling urban developments were slavers, Peace Brigade sympathizers, and prison populations imported in from neighboring systems. The Yuuzhan Vong themselves kept to their ships in orbit, relying on their puppet government for regular updates. And it wasn't like the puppet government was foolish enough to lie to the alien invaders; especially since their predecessors had been so publically executed after the failed uprising. They were given power, wealth, control over an entire planet, and all they had to do was keep the local Vong commander happy with information. It was fortunate that the *Rogue Shadow* was an intelligence asset and had the ability to change its transponder codes. Otherwise their welcome into the system might not have been so positive.

"I have a question," Zekk said lightly, now a crew member of the pirate vessel *Pasted Spellcaster*. "Suppose we do overthrow the local Vong commander and free Corulag, what do we do then? We'd still be stuck between the Vong fleets guarding Coruscant and that Vong fleet assaulting Taanab. And unless I missed something, Corulag is kind of lacking in that fleet department."

"We could always find some place to hide until reinforcements get here," Natua said.

"Which might be next week or next year depending on how far this war is dragged out," Rahm said. "I don't know about you Jedi, but I'd rather not spend a full year scurrying about from one safe place to the next hoping that everyone hasn't forgotten about us. Besides, Corulag's my homeworld. If you think I'm just going to hide out and let the rest of the population suffer you better have another think coming."
"Better scurrying than on the glowy side of a plasma cannon," Ganner said, reclined in the passenger chair with his eyes closed. He absently reached out with a hand and tapped at the transparent viewport where a fairly visible crater was still smoking on the planet below to emphasis his point. "Zekk's right, unless we move carefully, we don't really have any way to stop the Vong from glassing the planet."
"The first thing we should do is determine the status of the Corulag Underground," Juno voiced. "Once we find that out, we'll go from there."
"Sounds good to me," Ganner shrugged, yawning and shifting in his chair. "My other idea was to go sifting through the spacers over at the starport and see if we can't hijack one of their ships and get back to friendly territory."
"Hijack?" Zekk raised an eyebrow.
"We be aboard the pirate corvette *Pasted Spellcaster* now, Zekk the Wild Haired," Ganner said in a very poor imitation of a holovid pirate. He gave a lazy salute. "Myself and the fearsome Green Girl can easily convince some hapless slaver that we have more of a need for their vessel then they do."
"'Zekk the Wild Haired'? Really Ganner?" Zekk said, folding his arms in front of his chest. His incredulous expression was missed by the still partially-napping Ganner.
"How's 'Zekk the Stoic Woman Swooner'?"
"Ganner."
"Robber of Cradles?"
"I'm going to hit you over the head with a hydrospanner."
"Zekk the Foul-Tempered?"
"Where do you come up with these names?"
"I'm a genius."
"And what about your pirate name?"
"'Ganner 'the Dread One' Rhysode.'"
"It figures," Zekk deadpanned. He glanced towards Juno and Rahm. "Does our cover really have to be a pirate vessel?"
"Too late to change it now," Juno hid a smirk. "We're coming into port now. You make a good point though, Jedi Rhysode. In case we do need

a way off this planet fast, see if you and Jedi Wan can't relieve one of these despicable people of their ship."
"Yes, Captain Gold Hair."
"Don't push it."
0-[V]-0 0-[V]-0
Wrapping themselves up in inconspicuous all-purpose hooded cloaks, Ganner and Natua split off from Zekk and their pilots and made their way into the still fairly busy spaceport of what had once been the capital city of Corulag, Curamelle. The Yuuzhan Vong's apathy towards the everyday happenings on the planet was clear by the specific type of clientele the two Jedi passed by. And it only took them a few minutes of exploring to learn that the center of power had shifted with the installation of the puppet government. Crullov City, headquarters for most of the organized crime, was now the de facto capital, with the crime-lords there wielding almost as much power as the Yuuzhan Vong installed government. Unfortunately, this didn't bode well for any of the more law-abiding citizens trapped on Corulag.
"Well, we're definitely not on Mon Cal anymore," Ganner tried to sound aloof, but the tightening around his eyes betrayed his rather forced cheer.
Though it was a losing battle, Natua struggled not to react to the sights around her. Despite being a Falleen, trained to control her emotions, it was hard not to jump to the aid of a fellow Falleen girl younger than her being fitted with a slave harness. The slaver jabbed the Falleen slave with a shock-stick, while a kath hound barked menacingly at her heels.
"*Come on, pretty. You'll wear the harness of you know what's good for you."*
"Pretty, huh? I'll show him, pretty." Natua's voice was devoid of emotion, but her eyes were flashing murderously and her green skin darkening. The kath hound continued to bark in the background, not helping her mood. "And that little dog of his too."
Ganner wrapped an arm around the enraged Jedi and managed to guide her forcefully away from the scene. "Come on, Green Girl. Stoic Falleen, remember? Wanton slaughtering of deserving bad guys is kind of a dead giveaway that we're Jedi."
After a shuddering breath, her shoulders slumped and her hands unclenched. She forced herself to look away from the plight of the younger Falleen girl with a deadened look in her eyes. "There's so much suffering here, and not just what we can see, but also in the Force. There may not be any dark Jedi here, but the darkness present in this building, the despair, avarice, hatred, its almost overwhelming."

"Yeah," Ganner exhaled, hurrying their pace through the spaceport. He reached out with the Force and gently nudged the younger Knight. She established a bond with him and expelled the built up anguish and frustration she was feeling.
"How can Jedi claim to protect the galaxy when there are places like this where the dark side is so strong?"
"That's the funny thing about the Force," Ganner continued their conversation as they walked side by side. "The stronger the light, the easier it is for the darkness to hide. The reverse is also true. Just think about Master Yoda, or Emperor Palpatine. Master Yoda hid for over a decade on a dark side planet even though he was light. Why? Because the intensity of the dark side was so great that no one bothered looking for that tiny speck of light. The same is with the Jedi. The brighter the light we cast, the harder it is to spot the shadow. It's what keeps the galaxy, the Force, balanced. We can't save everyone or affect everything, but we can try to better what we *can* reach."
"You're starting to sound like a Jedi Master," Natua commented after several moments of thought.
"Great, maybe you can recommend me," Ganner smirked. "Then I can sit around in a council chamber and command all my underlings to do my bidding."
"So, we're looking for a ship," Natua said, her eyes darting from spacer to spacer.
"Something with shields and weapons," Ganner said, and then seeing where Natua's gaze was lingering, added. "Not a cargo ship full of slaves if that's what you're wondering."
"But we have to do *something*," Natua said softly.
"I know what you're feeling. I'm just as angry about it as you. But anything we do will draw unwanted attention to us," Ganner said. "If we're going to steal a ship, it has to be one that can survive a Yuuzhan Vong coralskipper strafing run. Slave transports aren't known for their durability."
"So we're just going to let all those slaves suffer?" Natua's voice was toneless as she looked away from a slave pen.
"Jedi Wan, do you really have so little faith in me?" Ganner said, using the Force to keep anyone from listening in.
"Jedi Rhysode?"
"Exactly, I'm Ganner Rhysode," Ganner gave her a winning grin beneath the cowl of his cloak. "Acting rashly and stupidly without getting killed is my specialty."
0-[VI]-0 0-[VI]-0

Zekk shuddered and pulled his cloak around him. He didn't know why but the Force was trying to warn him that an unstoppable chain of events was about to unfold.
"Are you sure it was alright to let Ganner and Natua go off on their own?"
"You don't trust your own friends?" Juno glanced over at Zekk.
"Not that," Zekk cast one last long look at the spaceport as he, Juno, and Rahm, exited the doors. "Just things tend to get absurdly ridiculous around Ganner. He's like a force of nature, a cyclone. It's actually safer to be near him than at a distance."
"'Absurdly ridiculous.' It almost sounds like your describing my husband," Juno said wryly.
"Ganner mentioned you were from Corulag, that you had family here."
They caught a taxi and Juno gave the autopilot a brief set of instructions before turning back to Zekk. "That's right. My husband and our daughter stayed behind to help with the resistance."
"And Ganner's like your husband?"
"Only in the force of nature, safer to be near him than at a distance sort of way," Juno said with a whimsical smile. "We've…been through a lot. The absurdly ridiculous and the insane. In fact, starting a family was probably the first normal thing we ever did."
"I can understand, kind of. I mean, most of my life has been one adventure after another. My idea of an outing with my friends is flying in an X-wing with other Jedi against impossible odds."
"Our idea of a honeymoon was being hunted by a bounty hunter, a Sith Lord, and a dark side, cloned version of my husband across ten systems."
Zekk blinked. "Really?"
Juno smirked and tilted her head. "You really can't make that sort of thing up."
"So where are we heading now?" Zekk glanced outside the window of the speeder and saw fields and fields of burnt farmland rush by.
"As far away from the city as possible," Rahm answered. "Just in case we've been tracked, we don't want to get anyone else involved."
"And then?"
"And then I let my dad and Mallie know where we are and let them come to us."
"Looks like even your family outings are…not exactly normal," Zekk commented.
Rahm leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together behind his head. "Well, when your dad's possibly a clone of a man who helped to

start the Rebel Alliance, created by Darth Vader himself, *none* of your days are normal."
Zekk gaped at the blond-haired teen.
Juno rolled her eyes and sighed. "It's been a while since Rahm's been able to leave anyone speechless with that."
"For once in my life, I'd like to actually meet a *normal* family," Zekk laughed.
"I would too," Rahm agreed.
Juno shook her head in amusement. "As would I, but after this long without any luck, I've given up hope."
0-[VII]-0 0-[VII]-0
Tenel Ka gripped the armrests of her chair as her ship shook violently. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet that had dropped into the Taanab system was persistent to say the least. After two days of skirmishes and hit-and-run attacks, Tenel Ka had had enough and hounded their attackers back out to the edge of the system. Even though the Hapan fleet was outnumbered nearly three-to-one, she had had much worse odds before.
"Report."
"That last volley knocked out engines two and three, ma'am," the helmsman called out. "I think the Yuuzhan Vong have managed to signal us out as the command ship, we have enemy fighters and two enemy cruisers inbound."
"And our fighter squadrons?"
"Still occupied with those last waves of coralskippers, ma'am."
"Then it is time to see just how much of a beating this ship can take. Set a collision course for one of the enemy cruisers. Divert all power to shields and engines."
"Setting course."
The *Royal Blood* rocked several times as a multitude of enemy squadrons screamed towards it, peppering it with molten rock.
In the distance, a Matalok appeared to take up the challenge and likewise set their own collision course. A second cruiser took up a flanking position so that it could unleash a full broadside on the Hapan Battle Dragon. The two alien cruisers approached like a pair of predators on the hunt, flying side-by-side and combining their void defenses to soak up any damage.
There was no help for the *Royal Blood.* All around them, the Hapan fleet was engaged in a pitch fight, outnumbered and out gunned with casualties mounting. Even then, the Hapans weren't going down without a fight, and a fair number of Yuuzhan Vong wrecks were floating about as well. It helped that both Seff Hellin and Madurrin were

aiding them with their battle meditation, but even they couldn't work miracles.
"Steady," Tenel Ka said calmly, knowing full well that the Yuuzhan Vong commander wasn't bluffing. That if given the chance, he would happily sacrifice his life to take them out. But that just worked in her favor. Fire from the two cruisers began blasting apart armored plating and igniting secondary explosions throughout the ship. Yet the well-disciplined bridge crew didn't question their leader's tactics, didn't waver one second. "Down ten degrees, hard to starboard, activate emergency dorsal thrusters."
Just before the Matalok and Battle Dragon collided, maneuvering thrusters—normally used to help the Battle Dragon with re-entry or disengaging from space dock—fired at once, dipping the Battle Dragon below the approaching cruiser and narrowly avoiding a devastating impact. The Hapan vessel proceeded to roll to the right and away from the first Matalok, passing directly under the second Matalok with only centimeters to spare. The first Matalok, in the commander's eagerness for a kill, tried match the unexpected course change of the enemy command ship, and ended up plowing into the side of the second in an explosive shower of coral and debris.
"Fire all missile and laser batteries the moment we have a targeting solution," Tenel Ka said, her voice holding no emotion as their ship turned around and promptly immolated the two Matalok with a devastating barrage of missiles and lasers. But their victory was short lived.
"Enemy fighters making a second run on our ship, Your Highness," the sensor operator warned. "Our shields are almost depleted."
"Still no word on the nearest fighter squadron?"
"No ma'am," the officer shook her head. "All fighter squadrons still occupied."
"You Highness! Detecting another fleet emerging from hyperspace!"
"Yuuzhan Vong?" Tenel Ka questioned sharply.
"No ma'am! Galactic Alliance."
"So they finally made it here, took them long enough," Tenel Ka said, tension easing from her shoulders as she felt additional Force presences make themselves known in the meld. They weren't the presences she had been expecting, however, and from what she could feel from Tekli and Seff, they were just as confused. "Put me through with Death Knight Leader."
"Yes, ma'am."
"Jedi Knight Kel, we thank you for your timely assistance."
"*Not a problem, Your Highness."*

"Forgive us for asking, but we were under the impression Jedi Knight Zekk and Rhysode were with you as well."
"They were, up until two days ago. A Yuuzhan Vong dovin basal system scattered our fleet and sent ships off course. We're actually only two-thirds of the fleet we started out as. Everyone else is scattered in the Colonies and Inner Rim."
Tenel Ka took the message in stride. She reached out with the Force to her missing friends and found Tekli doing the same. Both young women took a moment in the heated battle to combine their efforts and stretch their presence across the stars. After a few seconds, they felt the faint acknowledgements from both Zekk and Ganner, and the two women refocused on the present. "Understood," Tenel Ka said. "We'll simply have to go to them then. Care to assist us in removing the Yuuzhan Vong from this system?"
"*Your Highness, you don't even have to ask.*" The black-painted X-wings of the Death Knights roared into battle and immediately tangled with the incoming squadrons of coralskippers. Mon Calamari cruisers under Garm Bel Iblis positioned themselves alongside the *Royal Blood,* and their array of lasers created a further deterrent.
"The Yuuzhan Vong are withdrawing," the sensor operator announced.
"Let them go," Tenel Ka said. "We'll regroup and launch a new offensive when we are ready."
0-[VIII]-0 0-[VIII]-0
Seff Hellin had had his taste of all out warfare. Needless to say, he didn't care for it so much. But it was the hand he had been dealt and he could do little more than survive; ensure that the others around him survived. He had been relieved when the Yuuzhan Vong fleet that Tenel Ka's forces had engaged had only been a fraction of the fleet that had destroyed Kre'fey's forces. Though he spared a few seconds to wonder where the rest of the Vong fleet had disappeared to, the main thing that mattered was that they hadn't been at Taanab.
"Credit for your thoughts, Jedi Hellin?"
"Major Daine," Seff straightened at the voice of the elite pilot, then flinched when the action tugged on the stitches holding his insides together. Augmenting the coordination and morale of troops from a sitting position had been about the only thing he had been capable of throughout the engagement. As Tekli had already chided him, he was as close to death's door as one could get and she didn't need another Anakin repeat. Technically, he should have been resting, in a healing trance. With everything that had been going on, however, he had been unable to clear his mind and get in the mood for one. "How's General Farlander?"

"Making a full recovery," Zindra said. "Like what you should be doing."
Seff glanced about the busy makeshift bar set up on the surface of Taanab and shrugged. "I've always been a fast healer."
Zindra rolled her eyes and took the empty plasteel seat across from him. She ordered her drink with the bartending droid and sighed. "Can you kids *not* act so macho and make us older people look bad."
"You're not that much older than me," Seff remarked.
Zindra held up her cup of blue milk and glared at it before dowing it in one shot. "I don't know, sometimes I feel absolutely ancient. I wonder how General Antilles, Bel Iblis, and all those other fossils handle it?"
"They're probably used to it by now," Seff shrugged.
"Force I hope not," Zindra shuddered, gesturing to the barkeep to refill her glass. "If you can ever get used to this—the death, the panic, the not knowing if today's your last—I'm definitely retiring after this war is over."
"And let someone else take your place?" Seff said wisely.
Zindra closed her eyes, a pained expression on her face. "And there's the catch. I mean, if I leave, who else will look after the Barefoots? Make sure they stay alive?"
"If it's not us looking after the galaxy, who else?" Seff nodded. "Who else would we trust to keep our friends and family alive?"
"Yeah, who else?" Zindra whispered absently. "Did you know that Tahiri had the Barefoots for about half a year? In that time, she only lost two pilots, Ranman and Tiske. I get the squadron and I lose five pilots in a single engagement." Zindra stared at the cup of blue milk in her hands. "I mean, I've lost squadmates before. Heck my entire squadron was wiped out in their first engagement with the Vong. But this was different. *I* led these pilots, my friends, to their deaths. Because I couldn't come up with some Jedi miracle, five good pilots died."
"My inability to guard against the Vong attacks got Admiral Kre'fey and most everyone on the *Ralroost* killed," Seff shrugged glumly. "That's a couple thousand people. I guess when we Jedi mess up, a lot more people die."
"We're certainly pathetic, aren't we?" Zindra let out a choked laugh as her eyes glistened with tears. She stared up at the night's sky. "Some heroes of the war effort we are. Moping and being utterly depressed at this poor excuse for a bar. We're not even drinking anything alcoholic."
"Half my internal organs are still scrambled." Seff gestured to the bacta patch slapped onto his side. "What's your excuse?"
"Barefoot tradition to drink a blue milk after every engagement," Zindra held up her glass. "Didn't feel right to break with it."

"I hope being spaced from a command cruiser isn't a tradition," Seff grimaced. "That's one I don't want to repeat anytime soon."
"Understandable," Zindra clinked her glass with Seff's cup of water. "Here's to surviving another day and hoping we can survive the next."
"To hoping someone more competent than us comes along so we know our friends and family are truly safe," Seff responded.
They both drank to it.
"So," Seff said. "Any news from the bigwigs upstairs?"
"We're going to try and push to Corulag, like we originally planned," Zindra explained. "The Queen Mother has committed her forces and General Garm Bel Iblis likes our chances. Apparently the Queen Mother and Jedi Knight Tekli are sensing the rest of our reinforcements somewhere in that vicinity."
"So the rescuers become the rescued?"
"Something like that," Zindra nodded.
"I guess I'll get some rest then," Seff winced as he slid off the barstool. "Probably won't have any time to do so once we leave this system."

0-[IX]-0 0-[IX]-0

"They're Jedi?" Vale whispered, glancing at the hulking and heavily armed bipedal droids sitting in the ship's lounge. Most of them were older modeled war droids, but there were also a few of Lando's YVH-1's among them. One thing was common about all of them, however, and that was the glowing crystal matrix all of them seemed to have installed in their chests.
"Uh huh," Valin nodded as they carried their trays of food into the room. "Iron Knights. From what I remember, it's the crystal part of them that sentient and Force aware, the droid body is simply a way for them to get around."
"Oh," Vale blinked, as if it made perfect sense to see droids controlled by sentient Jedi crystals on a daily basis.
"It is kind of amazing, and ironic, that they've managed to assemble a droid army to face off against the Yuuzhan Vong," Valin continued, seemingly oblivious to his Nemodian friend's dumbstruck expression. The few hours of sleep the appearance of the Iron Knights allowed him to have had done wonders for his mental clarity and energy levels. The fact that they had also helped repulse several Yuuzhan Vong attacks meant that everyone could breathe easier as well. "I mean, they're both droids and Jedi, the ultimate Vong headache. And here they go recruiting stray battle droids and war droids from various places. I remember reading a report about the Orange Panthacs, one of their divisions, taking out a Vong invasion force. If there was ever an

argument that droids were sentient and were capable of caring, this is it."
"I think I'll just chalk this up to another one of my many mind-bending-moments-caused-by-a-Jedi moments," Vale said with a weak laugh. "Wherever you guys seem to go, the oddest things always happen."
"Blame the Force," Valin said with a faint smile. The two approached a table occupied by one of the Iron Knights, a blond-haired woman, and the only organic Jedi that had come with the droid fleet. "Jedi Knight Illum, Guri, Jedi Knight Azur-Jamin."
"Jedi Knight Horn," Tam Azur-Jamin gestured with a hand. "Come and join us. Guri was just talking about starting up a Human Replica Droid production factory on our flagship. We think that the Iron Knights will be able to integrate themselves better with the Jedi Order if they had appearances others could relate to. Do you agree?"
"We try not to discriminate, but it might help. Not sure the HRDs would be a solution though. My friends Sannah and Doran ran into some of those on Onadax, I think," Valin took the offered seat and entered into the discussion. "Something about HRDs going bad and teaming up with the Ssi-ruuk."
The blond-haired woman inclined her head. "I did tell Dash that automating the factory and leaving one of my kind in charge without any supervision was not the most advisable. It took a while for me to grow out of my programming, and I was lost for a while when I did. Perhaps he made the HRD too much like his brother, and greed got the better of it. I have learned from that mistake and will ensure that these HRD do not 'go bad.'"
"Wait, you're a droid?" Vale blurted, eyes round as she stared at the woman in the chair before her. "Don't tell me you're a Jedi too. One of those Iron Knights?"
Guri allowed the faintest of emotion to show on her face. "No, not a Jedi. Merely a former assassin who now has complete control over her life. And I prefer the name 'Guri'."
Vale blinked dimly. "Right."
"You are welcome to join us," the YVH-1 droid containing the Shard known as Illum vocalized.
Vale offered the Nemodian equivalent to a hesitant smile, and sat. "Thank you." She took a mouthful of food, and then glanced to Tam. "So…a Jedi YVH-1, a former assassin droid that looks eerily like a human…you're not a robot or cyborg or anything, Jedi Knight Azur-Jamin?"
"It's just Tam," Tam laughed. "And no, all of me is original and organic. I'm actually researching the Force and its connection to cybernetics

and droids. Kind of like how most Jedi consider the Yuuzhan Vong outside of the Force, many believe that droids are not part of the Force either. They think that cybernetics, droids, and the Force, are a recipe for the dark side. Interestingly enough, HRDs can be that missing link. I'm glad that Guri's decided to help us out. "
"You're doing research in the middle of a war?" Valin said in surprise.
"Why not," Tam said, shrugging one shoulder. "If there was as good a time as any for someone to go dark it's in the middle of a war. Illum and her children have been really generous in allowing me to stay with them."
"It is no trouble," Illum's feminine sounding voice seemed odd coming from a top of the line YVH-1 war droid. "You have been a very courteous guest and we continue to learn more about the living Force from you."
"Although I do have to remind them that oxygen, heating, and food are necessary for my continued functionality," Tam said dryly. "I've lost count of the number of times their droid friends forgot that my feet aren't magnetic and that my skin can't handle the sub-zero temperatures of space."
"Droids can't forget though," Vale pointed out. "That's what's good about them."
"Tell that to Illum's children," Tam remarked with a laugh. "When droids take on personalities of their own, they don't mind 'forgetting' things every so often. I think it's their way of having fun."
Mid-way through the meal, the Force sensitives froze.
Vale groaned. "More Vong?"
"No actually, more help," Valin exhaled. "Yaqeel and the others have finally arrived."
"Then it is time for us to leave," Illum said tonelessly.
"Illum?" Valin looked to the Iron Knight leader.
"We were here to help shore up your forces until reinforcements arrived. We have fulfilled our directive. There are other areas of this galaxy that are in need of our assistance."
"Well, then thanks for the help," Valin held out his hand.
Illum's photoreceptors mimicked a started blink as they briefly dimmed, but then Illum held out one of her own hands. "It was a pleasure to meet and work alongside you, Valin Horn."
"If the Iron Knights ever need help, let me know if I can return the favor," Valin nodded.
"We will," Illum said.
"Good luck retaking Corellia," Tam gave a brief salute.
"Good luck with your research," Vale piped in.

"Thanks, may the Force be with you all."

0-[X]-0 0-[X]-0

"Valin!" Valin was caught off guard as Yaqeel raced from the shuttle and hugged him with near bone crushing force.

"Hey Yaqeel," he said softly, rubbing her back awkwardly as he felt the younger teen use the Force to check on his condition. After a moment, though, he empathized with her and relaxed, adjusting his grip to better hold her. At the Shelter, she had always been that second little sister to him, Jysella's best friend. But with the war and everything going on, Valin found himself valuing his friendship with her a whole lot more. He closed his eyes and silently held her head to his chest, their Force presences syncing up and calming the other. Who knew that nearly half a year of fighting a seemingly endless war could have affected their Force bond so much?

After a moment, the young Bothan took a step back and blushed slightly when she realized where she was. She looked around for the other Horn, then cast a panicked glance to Valin when she didn't see her. "Val, where's Sella?"

"Still on Corellia with dad and Lowbacca," Valin grimaced, rubbing the back of his head. "As far as dad will let me know, both he and Sella are fine."

Yaqeel blanched. "And Corellia's Vong controlled?"

"Yeah," Valin said. "But don't worry, we're going to get her out of there."

"We better," Yaqeel said determinedly. "I'm not ready to lose any friends any time soon."

"And I'm not ready to lose my sister," Valin nodded. He glanced over Yaqeel's shoulder to the other occupants of the shuttle, all of whom were exchanging their own greetings with the other elements of General Panib's and Vedo the Hutt's command staff. "Jedi Knight Sebatyne."

"Jedi Knight Horn," Saba inclined her head. "You are well?"

"Received some help from the Iron Knights," Valin nodded. "Probably wouldn't have lasted without them."

"Well, now you have the Wild Knightz," Saba said with a hissing laughter. "Fangz and claw are just az good az knightz of iron."

"I'll take your word for it," Valin smiled faintly. Barabel humor took some getting used to. He gestured towards the hallway behind him. "General Panib is in the main briefing room to update you all. We've managed to outlast the Yuuzhan Vong's harassing fleet and we were only waiting for your reinforcements before we make a push towards Corellia."

"Understood," General Wedge Antilles nodded, stepping away from Vedo. "I've always wanted to visit my homeworld again. Lead the way."
"Yes, sir."
0-[XI]-0 0-[XI]-0
"Kirney," Myn whispered, leaning across the table as Jysella, Lowbacca, Danielle, and Tarc discussed with Rostek Horn on how to best overthrow the Corellian government.
"Yes Myn?"
"Didn't you say something about not letting those silly warriors with glow-swords change our mind about our occupation?"
"I did, didn't I?"
"We're not doing too good a job at that part."
"Technically it was the Vong invasion that changed our mind. We were simply shuttle drivers for a representative of the Jedi Order who got caught up in something much bigger than us. You know, like that Face holovid *Rebels with a Cause*?"
"The one where Face's parents are taxi drivers who become freedom fighters after their son is killed by a tyrannical, Rebel Alliance backed government?"
"One of the few movies where Face actually dies," Kirney nodded. "After the backlash from the billions of teenage girls in the galaxy, I don't think a movie company was ever brave enough to kill him off again. Although the death scene was pretty moving. *'Father, mother, whatever you do, don't let my death be in vain. Don't let those terrorist control our lives at gunpoint. I am proud to die a noble son of the Empire.'*"
Myn raised an eyebrow as his wife pantomimed the last scene, lying against his chest and gripping one of his hands. "If I recall correctly, his father became a crack sniper and was able to eliminate his Rebel Alliance counterpart, Quoin Caribees."
"Uh huh."
"If Myn needs to become a sniper again, Myn is not buying Kolot any more steaks," Myn said. "Last time was the only time I'll ever tell him I'll get him 'all you can eat.'"
"Yub yub, Myn," Kirney grinned at him.
"So," Rostek Horn said, a bit louder. "I can have two squadrons of CorSec personnel help us, but the Diktat will probably be expecting a coup. He knows how unpopular his decision has been with the rest of the general populace and will no doubt have more than one avenue of escape should his fortune changes. If he escapes, he can rally the Yuuzhan Vong and those loyal to him."

"[Leave the Diktat to us,]" Lowbacca growled softly. "[He cannot run if being held in place by the Force.]"
"The real question is, can we get to him before he sees us coming?" Danielle said. "It's not like any of our ships are equipped for stealth."
"We take advantage of his greed," Jysella said aloud.
"Meaning?" Tarc raised an eyebrow.
"The Diktat wants to look good in front of the Yuuzhan Vong, let's make him look good. Let's say two squadrons of brave and loyal CorSec soldiers manage to find and apprehend one of the fugitive Jedi. Do you think the Diktat is going to let anyone but himself hand that Jedi over to the Vong?"
"[And you will be that captured Jedi?]" Lowbacca huffed in displeasure.
"No offense, Lowie, but a Wookie kind of stands out. Plus, this will need to be believable. One twelve-year old Jedi captured by two squads of trained soldiers is more realistic than two Jedi, one of them a Wookie, being captured without any casualties."
"As much as I hate to use my great granddaughter as bait, it may be the only way," Rostek said solemnly. "Unless one of the others can think of another way to reach the Diktat without arousing suspicion?"
The others all looked at each other, not looking pleased at all but unable to come up with another idea.
"What's to keep the Diktat from excluding the two squadrons once they hand Jysella over?" Tarc asked. "If he's as paranoid and suspicious as we all think he is, he's only going to let his most trusted people near him."
"Jysella's also going to have to be in the presence of a ysalamir if the capture is going to be believable," Kirney spoke softly. She looked to the twelve year old with a serious expression. "You'll be powerless Jedi-wise."
Jysella gulped and forced a smile. "Then please come up with a better idea."
Everyone looked to each other as an uncomfortable silence descended. No one liked the idea of putting a twelve year old Jedi Apprentice in danger, yet they really had no other choice. Just as the plan was about to be approved, however, a solution came in, and it was from the least likely of individuals.
"Kolot has idea," the lone Ewok at the table voiced.
All eyes turned to the pint-sized pilot. "Go ahead Kolot," Myn nodded.
"Rig cage with ysalamir. Alive one moment, dead the next. Jedi can then escape Diktat snare, yub yub."
There was deafening silence after that proposal, much different than the previous one.

"Did we all just get out-thought by an Ewok?" Rostek blinked.
"Yup," Tarc laughed as Kolot growled in amusement. Everyone else began to chuckle as well.
"So we rig the cage we give the CorSec squads to kill the ysalamir."
"It should be remote, or a physical switch on the cage," Myn spoke up. "That way Jysella can control when and where she can get her powers back."
"So she's free, what then?"
"Grandpa Horn can help coordinate our efforts," Kirney said. "Myn and Kolot will be sniper support and also let the rest of us know of reinforcements arrive. In the meantime, Jedi Lowbacca, Tarc, Danielle, and myself will be on Dani's ship with whatever other number of sympathizers Grandpa Horn can round up. When Jysella gives the signal, we break through a wall, unload the troops, capture the Diktat and said flunkies, and Grandpa Horn's politician friends do the rest."
"You make it sound so simple," Danielle drawled. "We do all that and be back by dinner, right?"
"Let's do this. And if anyone questions what can possibly go wrong, I'll shoot them myself," Rostek Horn added dryly.
"Are we writing a book after this? How to stage a coup in twenty-four hours?" Tarc asked curiously.
"You can," Myn said. "Your mother and I are just two tour guide pilots who are way out of our league."
"I've never participated in a coup before," Jysella said with mock excitement. "How many chances will I ever get to overthrow my home planet's government?"
"Hopefully not many," Rostek scoffed. "Otherwise you're really going to have to question the intelligence of the Corellians who elect our leaders." The elderly operative shared a meaningful glance with the others. "I'll start things moving with my contacts. We'll flesh out the details of our plan and then go from there. Hopefully by the time your Galactic Alliance friends drop in, we'll have the planet firmly on their side again."
"If not?" Tarc asked curiously.
"If not," Rostek said with a hoarse laugh and an amused shake of his head. "This will probably be the last night any of us will ever see."

0-[XII]-0 0-[XII]-0

The introduction of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong to Zonama was one big success. Already damuteks were being set up for temporary residence while coral seeds were planted for more permanent structures. Warriors were helping to form a perimeter for the first Yuuzhan Vong

city in several millennia, a sprawling settlement already being called 'Yun-Yuuzhan'.
Shapers were having a field day with the wildlife that was so like their own, yet different. Shaping supplies had been brought down to help them interact with the planet on a much deeper level and run test on the compatibility of their own tech and the biots found on Zonama. Ferroan guides were helping the shapers acclimatize to the abundance of plant and animal life, but also seemed just as fascinated with the creatures crawling off the Yuuzhan Vong transports.
Those from the Intendant caste had their hands full as well, directing incoming transports of Yuuzhan Vong and supplies to various locations and working with other Ferroans to better plan out the city of Yun-Yuuzhan. The logistics of moving several tens of thousands of people to the planet and getting them settled was great, yet the former Intendant caste members proved up to the challenge.
Even the priests who had defected were holding mass prayers to the gods, thanking them for rewarding their faith. Freed Ones and other Freed Yuuzhan Vong joined in the prayers, their voices rising up to the sky in a heartfelt harmony. They had finally found a place they could belong, that meshed with their unique view of life, and their joy was clear in their worshipful cries.
"Amazing," Mara said, staring at the scene below from one of the Sekotian airships. They had been using the airship to ferry themselves from one side of the sprawling settlement to the other, watching as the Yuuzhan Vong slowly began to settle in. "If you told me I'd be seeing something like this a couple years ago, I would have thought you insane."
"Me too," Anakin laughed, his arms wrapped around a very contented Tahiri.
"Me three," Jacen added.
"Uncle Luke, in your infinite wisdom, did you ever think you'd see this?" Jaina said good-naturedly.
Luke grinned, the years melting off his prematurely aged face as he shook his head. "No. Remember, the Yuuzhan Vong are outside of the Force as most people know it. This would have been nothing more than wishful thinking, a dream, all those years ago."
"It is indeed an awe-inducing sight," Vergere said, tilting her head in amusement as Sekot tried to keep the Yuuzhan Vong from bowing to itself every time it materialized.
The airship glided to a graceful landing on the opposite riverbank, and its passengers disembarked.
Awaiting them was an eager handful of people.

"Supreme Leader," Luke inclined his head politely as the others stepped off behind him.
"Master Skywalker," Taan's faced appeared to be locked in a permanent grin. "Thank you and your Jedi for making all of this possible."
"I cannot take any credit for this," Luke gestured to his nephews, niece, and Tahiri. "The true heroes of this tale are them."
Taan nodded in acceptance. "Nevertheless, you have taught them well. They have kind hearts and selflessly went out of the way to ensure that the Yuuzhan Vong will not disappear into the annals of time."
"Have you run into any problems?" Jacen glanced back and forth between Taan and Jabitha, the Magister of the Ferroan people.
"Only a few misunderstandings," Jabitha shook her head. "But that was to be expected."
"We are equally indebted to the Ferroans for being so willing to share their homeworld with us," Taan said solemnly, but with an undercurrent of excitement. "We're currently negotiating trade contracts with the Magister's people in order to further diversify the knowledge we have at our disposal."
"I'm so glad things are working out," Jaina beamed. "Do you really think the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong will be able to settle on Zonama?"
Taan nodded. "In my heart I do. Of course, there are several Yuuzhan Vong colonies already established in your galaxy. We will give them the option to return here, but it would not be right to uproot them again if they have settled."
"We'll do our best to see to their safety once the war is over," Mara said aloud. "It will be hard to convince the rest of the galaxy, however, to leave those colonies alone."
"We'll…what is the phrase you use? We'll 'cross that bridge' when we get to it," Taan said. "After seeing Zonama and talking with Sekot, however, I can't help but be hopeful."
"I know we talked about it earlier, but you won't mind if Anakin and I stay here with the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong?" Tahiri said, leaning back against Anakin with his arms draped around her.
"You and anyone else who wants to stay will be more than welcome," Taan nodded. "I dare say that it will be impossible to keep Danni Quee away for any length of time either. We will welcome whatever aid and guidance you provide as the Yuuzhan Vong go through this difficult transition."
"Speaking of transition," Anakin glanced around at the small group of Yuuzhan Vong and Ferroans. "Where's Shaeri and how's she doing?"

"She is assisting the shapers in examining Zonama's hyperdrive," Taan replied. "Her past experience with dovin basals and your hyperdrives makes her an unofficial expert on such matters."
"How about that, huh," Jacen chuckled.
"It's the other passengers I picked up that are a bit more colorful," Tahiri grinned.
"Indeed," Taan said dryly. "That is definitely one way to describe them."
"And what's this about some type of Yuuzhan Vong 'prophet'?" Luke voiced. "He was not with you when you landed?"
"Yeah," Tahiri frowned. "Where is he anyways? He wasn't onboard the *Veila."*
Taan sighed. "He said he wanted to give the honor of seeing Zonama in person to those more worthy than he. He's still on the *Blessed by the Jedi*."
"I thought he'd be the first to join us out here," Tahiri blinked.
Taan winced. "I have a small admission to make. The information we've received from our agents on Coruscant suggests that Yu'shaa is actually Nom Anor."
Eyebrows shot up and a flurry of questions followed. "Nom Anor?"
"Really? Are you sure?"
"You're sure it's safe to leave him alone up there?"
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"Please," Taan held out her hands. "The reason why I did not inform you is because this is an internal, Yuuzhan Vong matter. If Yu'shaa is indeed Nom Anor, he is nevertheless still a Yuuzhan Vong and should be dealt with according to *our* ways. Please try and understand that I am trying to build the confidence of our people up and the Supreme Council cannot have any legitimacy if we are continuously relying on the Jedi and the Galactic Alliance to solve our problems and apprehend our own people. Also, this is the Freed Yuuzhan Vong way of giving Nom Anor one last chance to see the error of his ways. If he joins us he will be a great asset. Beside, even though most of the *Blessed by the Jedi*'s population is now on Zonama Sekot, there are still over a hundred warriors onboard. No matter how ingenious Nom Anor may be, even he won't act against those odds."
"If you're certain," Mara said dubiously.
Taan nodded once. "I am. Even if you think this is a mistake, it is our mistake to make. The Supreme Council and the Yun-Jedi were surprisingly unanimous in this decision, though not without our doubts. All Yuuzhan Vong deserve another chance outside of Shimrra's grasp, even someone as distasteful as Nom Anor. That is the foundation of

the Freed Yuuzhan Vong. Once you are among us you will be judged not by your past, but by what you do from here and into the future."
"Wise words," Luke complimented.
"Leia Organa Solo is every bit the excellent teacher you are, Master Skywalker," Taan smiled faintly. "Now please, do not ruin this momentous event by dwelling on the actions of a single individual. He is in high orbit, under guard, and without any villip or Yuuzhan Vong weapon, we made sure of that. Come and enjoy the fruits of your labor and see the beginnings of a new, happy, Yuuzhan Vong people."

0-[XIII]-0 0-[XIII]-0

Nom Anor and his compatriots walked through the lifeless barracks with grim satisfaction over their gnullith-covered faces. The dozens of warriors that had been within it had all died—some in their sleep, others clawing at the closed membranes that had sealed off the room. Other chambers aboard the *Blessed by the Jedi* were similarly devoid of life, as sabotage by one of Phaa Anor's compatriots had temporarily paralyzed the *Blessed by the Jedi*'s respiration and voided the vessel of breathable air. Within seconds most of the crew would have been feeling light-headed, experiencing the early stages of oxygen deprivation. Within minutes they would have all been dead.
A villip jamming device secreted away by another one of Phaa Anor's people had ensured that those who had remained conscious could no longer call for help. The combination of the two strategies had all but ensured the security of the ship to themselves. It would have been an impossible task had the Matalok been fully staffed. But with the majority of the crew on the planet, the several hundred warriors had been easy to avoid and overcome.
The group of Shimrra loyalists passed through several more chambers before stepping onto the bridge itself. There the skeleton crew was sprawled out among the control panels.
"Clear the bodies," Nom Anor ordered the four others who had come with him.
They did as commanded and took position at the villip choir and other vital stations.
"The ship is ours, Executor," one of the conspirators called out. "Phaa Anor has control of the dovin basals and is reporting that we are the only ones living onboard this vessel."
"Very good," Nom Anor said smoothly. "Scan the planet. It has infidel hyperdrives built in so those should be easy to find."
"What do you intend to do, Executor?"

"Why rid this galaxy of that planet, of course," Nom Anor replied. "Unless, that is, you believe all the rumors that such a place is the salvation of our people?"
The Yun-Harla infiltrator swallowed nervously and shook his head. "No, Executor."
"Then we are doing our people a service by ridding them of this false hope."
"Scans complete, we've located the hyperdrive."
Nom Anor crouched down by the body of the captain of the ship and saw that the warrior had a blaster strapped to his side. Slowly, the Executor removed the weapon and hid it in his robes. "Adjust our orbit so that we will pass over it in the next hour."
"Adjusting course, we will have to drop to low orbit, however."
"Make it so."
The ship shuddered and rumbled as it broke its orbit and began a partial descent.
"Executor, receiving villip transmissions from some of the fleet. They are wondering why we are changing position."
"Ignore them for now," Nom Anor said. "Are we in position?"
"Yes, the hyperdrive will be in range shortly."
"Good. Your job is done then, the gods will be pleased." Nom Anor withdrew the blaster and promptly executed each of the four Shimrra loyalists. He activated his personal villip which Phaa had given to him. "Cousin, the captain of the ship had a gnullith and killed the rest of my group. I myself have been wounded. I am going to the medical bay to treat myself, have yourself and the others move to the bridge to take over."
"Understood cousin. Does the rest of the fleet suspect?"
"I am uncertain," Nom Anor said. "Though after so long a silence, they must. Prepare some story to buy us just a little more time, then we will be within firing range."
"Al'tanna Shimrra knotte Yun'o!"
"Yes, may Shimrra live long indeed," Nom Anor said tonelessly.
He discarded his villip and pulled out the flask of potent virus. If his timing was right, the virus would cause the ship to crash into the hyperdrive of the planet and spread across the planet in the process. He flicked the timed release seal and stepped back to check if he had forgotten anything. Satisfied, he promptly fled the bridge and hurried through the hallways of the large cruiser.
He made his way to one of the many docking bays of the ship and boarded an unused transport. Within seconds he had departed the *Blessed by the Jedi*, leaving his own future to fate. And within minutes

after his vessel jumped to hyperspace, the coral of the *Blessed by the Jedi* began to bubble…
0-[Chapter Break]-0
A\N: Next update tomorrow!

ADA 58

Fifty-Eight
0-[I]-0 0-[I]-0
Shaeri was enjoying a nice conversation with Sekot; not a physical one, but more of the spiritual kind. Nen Yim and the other shapers had brought with them some type of heavily modified qahsa, an organic computer analog, attached to a cognition hood that would allow them to sync with the life on Zonama Sekot the same way it allowed Yuuzhan Vong to sync with their ships. Not only would they be sharing their own memories, but they would be able to see some of Zonama Sekot's memories as well.
Although, Shaeri mentally amended, linking with a planet that was possibly the origin of your people was a bit more life-changing.
The memories exchanged had been more than amazing. To think that Sekot was once a seed of their original homeworld was mind-numbing. Had they really traveled through the stars and suffered for so long only to find what they had lost all those years ago? There was no denying the similarity of the creatures and plants that lived on Zonama to those that had once populated the original Yuuzhan'tar. The shapers had been completely ecstatic to discover a genetic drift of only a thousand years from the records stored in their qahsas; actual proof of the memories they were viewing.
As for Shaeri, well, she was just happy that the faith she had put in her friends, had borne such wonderful fruit.
"So you call these Jedi your friends now?" Sekot spoke in a gentle whisper. With every word communicated, Shaeri always got the impression that the living planet was making a conscious effort to speak to her on some level that didn't melt her brain. Of course, after the first conversation, Shaeri had gotten over her fear that Sekot would melt her to a little puddle of organic broth should she inadvertently anger the planet.
Friends, family, Shaeri thought, reclined in a polyp bed and simply wondering at the marvel of communicating with a sentient planet. Next to her polyp bed were several dozen others, all shapers carrying on their own conversations with Sekot. *Since I have joined them, they have been nothing else but kind and caring to me.*

"You are so selfless, Shaeri," Sekot's thoughts were warm and soothing. *"And brave."*
I try, Shaeri thought softly, blushing at the compliments. *As a Shamed I was forced to put everyone else above me. Even if I am friends with the Jedi and can...'rub shoulders' with the leaders of this galaxy, I will never forget that there are others just like me who were not as fortunate. I just want my people to be happy, my friends and family to be...at peace.*
"Peace, a word not in your native tongue."
I've learned much of that concept in my time with Tahiri and the others. I've learned so much from them, grown in ways I never thought possible.
"I can see that. Thank you again for letting me take an impression of you."
I am honored that you find me worthy of such an effort.
"I can see why Jaina Solo and Tahiri find it so exasperating."
Sekot?
"I've spent the first few years of my existence as a god-like character to the Ferroans. Even now most still treat me as an omnipotent being. But like Jaina Solo and Tahiri Kwaad, I am far from it. Like them, I am still learning, growing. From my conversations with the shapers I am piecing together my own origins. And from the arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong, I am hoping to find a new purpose. Your original home planet cast me off and I landed here. Perhaps I was to continue the role of my progenitor and be the home it had once been for the Yuuzhan Vong."
We'll have to find a new purpose too, Shaeri sighed aloud. "After centuries of warmongering, we'll need all your help in finding a new direction."
"I will be more than..."
"Sekot?" Shaeri opened her eyes when she felt the sentient planet break the link with the cognition hood. Carefully she removed the hood and looked around. From the confused expressions on the other shapers, Sekot was no longer speaking with them either.
"Look!" Ahsi Yim cried out, pointing to the sky.
Eyes turned upwards, and gasps of alarm rang out. A Matalok was making a heated reentry, breaking up over the planet as it did.
"That's the *Blessed by the Jedi*," whispered one of the shapers.
"It's going to come down at the hyperdrives," Ahsi said, after briefly calculating its trajectory.
"We're the closest," Shaeri called out over the ship's ear-jarring rumble above them. Bits and pieces of yorik coral, bubbling and burning in their descent, rained down all around them as the dying ship passed

by above them. A second later, there was an earth-shaking blast as the ship impacted the ground. Shaeri looked to the shapers. "Some of you, come with me. Bring the medical supplies, there might be some survivors who need our help. The rest of you, return to the main clearing and let the others know what's happen."
"I'll go with you," Ahsi nodded. "It looked like enough of the ship survived re-entry so I might be able to find out what happened from it."
"Okay," Shaeri said glanced at the others as several began to trek back through the tampasi to the main landing site. "Let's go. We have people to save."

0-[II]-0 0-[II]-0

Corulag, once the paragon of a galaxy in the High Imperial times, had fallen far. Part urban sprawl, part bamboo forest, and part ocean, there was nothing remotely resembling its golden years left in existence. The urban sprawl was mostly controlled by a Yuuzhan Vong-backed puppet government, with the shadowy areas now in complete control of the criminal elements. Most of the other citizens were either in hiding or in labor camps; or dead.
"Take me to your leader," Ganner waved his hand.
"I will take you to my leader," the high level corrupt official repeated dutifully. The official pulled out his comlink and a meeting with his superiors was immediately created. "Follow me."
"How many times are we going to do this?" Natua whispered from Ganner's side.
"Patience, Green Girl," Ganner said amicably as they followed said high level official. "Eventually we'll run out of leaders to be taken to. Follow the lizard-monkeys and you'll eventually meet their master."
"But we've been doing this for the last day and a half," Natua said. "What is this going to accomplish?"
"All part of my master plan."
"And that is?"
"You'll see. In any case, I think we're nearing the top of the ladder. This area of the city looks a lot nicer than the last one, and the guy we're following has an important title, 'Minister of Agriculture.' Ministers are always high up in the government."
Natua looked at Ganner incredulously. "I thought we were working on a way to free the slaves?"
"We are."
"And find a way off the planet."
"We are."
"And not draw attention to ourselves."
"We…kind of are."

"By being taken to the leaders of this Vong-backed government?"
"Don't you trust me?"
"No."
"I'm hurt."
"So are the countless slaves suffering a dozen levels below us."
"This will work out, promise."
Natua looked as if she wanted to object, but remained silent.
Eventually, they were led to the upper most levels of the spire, past several reception desks, and into an audience chamber of sorts.
"Thank you," Ganner tapped the official's shoulder. "You will consider a change in lifestyle and make your way off this planet for a better, less agony-filled life."
The official nodded and went on his way.
"Ready Green Girl?"
"For what?"
"Just play along."
"If you say so."
"Good, then you won't mind changing your skin to angry-red? You know, to look more intimidating?"
Her brow rose, but she concentrated and her green skin slowly changed to the shade of red most of her species turned when enraged.
"Perfect," Ganner smiled.
Seconds later, the upper tiers of the room were filled with the ten-member council installed by the Yuuzhan Vong to oversee the daily running of the planet. They were actually the second group to be installed, the entirety of the first group killed by their Yuuzhan Vong masters when they failed to squash the first rebel uprisings. This group was extremely biddable, and deathly afraid of sharing their predecessors' fate.
"Minister Tolan informed us he had an urgent matter we had to attend to," an obese looking official huffed. "What was so urgent he had us drop everything and pander to you?"
"I'm shocked and appalled," Ganner said darkly. "That you do not recognize the Director of Peace Brigade Operations on Yuuzhan'tar, glory to the Yuuzhan Vong."
"Director?" The council was clearly skeptical.
"Yes," Ganner nodded. He opened his mouth to introduce himself, and then figured a name like Ganner Rhysode was a bit too recognizable.
"My name is Zekk Wan Tu the Third. This is my loyal aide, Natua Rhysode. No relation to that despicable Jedi."
"We were not informed of your arrival. Commander Oz'galathsha Shen'g would have told us if someone of your status was visiting."

"You dare?" Natua spoke up, getting into the spirit of things. It helped that her Falleen nature allowed her to better manipulate the mix-gendered council. "Do you truly think the great and terrible Oz is beholden to you? That he must inform you of his every doing? Call him if you wish, but do not blame us if he executes some of you for thinking above your station. Besides, only a complete fool would pretend to be a Director of the Peace Brigade and hope to get away with it."
Ganner cleared his throat. "Err…yes, what my aide said. Commander Shen'g has far more important things to do than to bother himself with the likes of you. That is, unless you wish to draw attention to yourselves?"
The Force, coupled with Natua's Falleen's pheromones, had the council sitting on tenterhooks. The leader of the council tugged at his collar nervously. "If you are truly who you say you are. What is it you have come here for?"
"Why the annual collection of slaves to be sacrificed at a mass ceremony on Yuuzhan'tar, of course. All planets loyal to the long-lived Shimrra are obligated to pitch in. Were you not aware of that?"
"Annual…"
"…collection?"
"Yes," Ganner waved a datapad in the air. "Shimrra has decreed that all planets loyal to the Yuuzhan Vong must make a tribute of slaves proportional to the population of the planet. In light of recent events, the infidel uprising and such, he has set a high level of tribute for this planet specifically."
"And how many slaves are we talking about?"
"No less than a hundred thousand," Ganner shrugged as if the number was nothing.
The council was silent for a long moment, panicked glances being exchanged back and forth. Finally, the leader spoke.
"My dear Director, I am afraid such number is impossible. We would have to confiscate every slave owned on the planet, and even then we'd only have about seventy-five thousand."
"You have camps full of prisoners," Ganner pointed out. "Get rid of the most troublesome ones. They'll all be sacrificed on Yuuzhan'tar anyways. If you want, you can even give Shimrra more than a hundred thousand bodies. The more sacrifices, the more favorably the gods will look upon you."
"Yes…" One of the other council members said slowly. "That would work. But it will take time, and the slave owners and slavers won't necessarily be pleased if we take their…"

"You just aren't understanding things, are you?" Natua interrupted coolly. "Let's put it another way. Would you loyal council-members prefer to go against these miserable excuses for people, or against Oz'galathsha Shen'g? Against the fleets of Shimrra?"
"We'll need 'til the end of the week to round up the numbers required," the council leader said hastily.
"And the transports needed to transport them," Ganner said with a brief gesture.
"Yes, and the transports." The council was nodding eagerly, so much so that it looked as if their heads might bobble off.
"Good people," Natua remarked, and with her pheromones still affecting them, they all reacted as if they had been praised by Shimrra himself. "You will of course give the director and I appropriate quarters for our stay. It is not our fault, after all, that we have to wait so long for you to fulfill Shimrra's wishes."
"Yes, of course."
"And you will allow us to meet the crews of each transport you find," Ganner added. "We must make sure they won't offend Shimrra, the great ruler he is."
"The moment we get the crews, we'll send them to you."
"Shimrra will be most pleased," Natua said. "Now go and follow the commands of the Supreme Overlord."
As she and Ganner were ushered off to some of the finest quarters Corulag had to offer, it took all of Natua's Jedi and Falleen training to hide her incredulity at what had just happened.
Told you it'd be fun, Red Girl.
I'm <u>never</u> doubting you again.
0-[III]-0 0-[III]-0
"Heads up, something big is going down," one of the members of Corulag's resistance movement announced as he entered the dimly lit bar. It was in one of the lower reaches of the less reputable urban sprawls on Corulag, but was the only safe place for the leaders of Corulag's anti-Yuuzhan Vong movement to kick back and relax.
Zekk and the others all looked up at the serious tone of the man's voice.
"What's wrong?" Galen Marek, once an assassin for the Empire, voiced.
"Some Peace Brigade big shot has arrived," the resistance member reported. "Has Oz's pawns in a twist."
"Peace Brigade," Zekk hissed darkly. "How many times are we going to have to deal with those close-minded, loud-mouthed idiots?"
"Once more it seems," Juno Eclipse shook her head. "Which big shot is it this time?"

"Another director," the messenger rolled his eyes. "It's been all over the news feeds. Direct orders from Coruscant."
They glanced at the datapad the messenger tossed onto the table.
"'All slaves must be brought to the capital courtyard in two days' time by order of the Supreme Overlord. Anyone caught with a slave after said time limit will be summarily executed by the Yuuzhan Vong.'" Rahm Marek read aloud.
"Well, that's one more pawn that needs to be taken out," Galen exhaled. "What's this director's name?"
The messenger shrugged. "Didn't bother to check. He's still scum to me. It's on the datapad though."
"Rahm?"
"It says here the director's name is… Zekk?"
"Huh?" Zekk looked up at the teen. "What?"
"No, the Peace Brigade Director, his name is Zekk."
"What are the odds?" Rahm's older sister, Mallie blinked.
"Zekk Wan Tu the Third," Rahm finished reading. "And his assistant is…Natua Rhysode?"
"Ganner!" Zekk groaned, bending forward so that his head touched the surface of the plastisteel table.
"Friends of yours?" Galen said lightly, bemused by the younger Jedi's reaction.
"You could say that," Rahm said, still looking at the datapad as if it were an alien life-form.
"Can I see that?" Juno gestured to the datapad. After skimming it over, she tilted her head. "Well, if he pulls off his plan, he's probably going to be more famous than the Solos."
"It's best if we leave Ganner to his own devices," Zekk explained, rubbing at his forehead. "What we have to do is figure out a way to extract him if things go wrong."
"You're sure he doesn't need help?" Galen asked
"I've worked with him for the better part of two years now," Zekk smiled faintly. "Ganner does what Ganner does, but he always has a purpose. If he's taking such a huge risk by infiltrating a corrupt government, he'll be counting on me for an exit strategy."
Galen accepted the datapad from his wife and looked it over. "We'll start putting people in place by the main spaceport. If he's extracting that many slaves, any trouble will start there."
"Can we get a few more in the government building, just in case their cover is blown beforehand?"
Galen nodded. "I think that's doable."

"Great," Zekk let his head fall back onto the table top again. "While we're all getting ready, I'm going to just close my eyes and pretend these last few minutes have been a very bad dream."
"And he was supposed to find a way for *us* to get off the planet," Rahm said, still looking impressed.
"Us or a hundred-thousand slaves," Mallie smirked, looking a lot like her mother with her blond hair tied back in a bun. "Sounds like he did the Jedi thing."
"No," Zekk shook his head. "The Jedi thing would have been to lay low and free everyone once help arrives. What he did…that's a Ganner-thing. Or maybe it's an Anakin thing. They both have a habit of drawing everyone into their plans."
"It doesn't matter," Galen said solemnly. "Even if help is coming, like you've said, Zekk, this will be the first real step we'll have taken to healing this planet in this entire war. There's been too much suffering already, and whether it's Ganner-ish or Jedi-ish, I'm all for lessening the pain in the Force this planet is producing. Sooner, rather than later."
"Yeah," Mallie looked down. "You've been lucky, Rahm, jetting around the galaxy with mom. You didn't have to watch our homeworld fall to pieces. This planet's only gotten worse and worse as the years went on. It's about time we can actually make a difference."

0-[IV]-0 0-[IV]-0

Jysella didn't have to try hard to look scared and nervous as she was marched across the front plaza towards the Coronet capital building. For one, her hands were bound in stun-cuffs, and for another, a ysalamir being held in a nearby cage had taken away her ability to use the Force. Add to the fact that she was being escorted by two squadrons of very serious-looking, heavily armed CorSec officers, and it appeared as if the young almost-teen was being treated more like a mass murderer than a fugitive Jedi twelve-year old.
If it weren't for the fact that the two squadrons of CorSec officers were friends of her great grandfather, the ysalamar had a kill switch, she had a subdermal communicator installed by her jaw, and her friends were a simple comm-call away, Jysella doubted her legs would have even functioned.
"Halt!" Three more squadrons of CorSec personnel came out of the capital with blasters raised. "This area has been locked down pending the departure of the Yuuzhan Vong representative."
"We have a prisoner to deliver to the Diktat," one of the CorSec officers escorting Jysella barked in turn. "Standing orders are to escort any captured Jedi to him. Or did you miss the fact that we're holding a ysalamir and her lightsaber, *captain?*"

The captain didn't relent. "Nevertheless, Major, no one comes or goes from the capital building without the expressed permission of Adjunct Executor, Kotsah Skell. The Diktat is currently busy with negotiations and is not to be disturbed."
"Look, this is a Jedi," the Major gestured to Jysella. "Do you want to stand around out here holding a ysalamir or give them over to the Vong? The sooner the Vong get what they want, the sooner they leave."
"We still can't allow you or your men to enter the building, they haven't been cleared."
"That's fine," the major handed over the ysalamir cage to the startled captain. "Me and my men have better things to do than to babysit a Jedi brat. Take her to the Adjunct Executor and the Diktat, take the credit for capturing her, we don't care."
"We'll do just that, Major." The captain leveled his blaster at Jysella, the mid-day sun glinting off his bald head. "Come, Jedi scum. The Diktat has been eager to meet you."
Jysella pretended to look scared out of her mind as she nodded obediently and began moving ahead of the group. They kept the ysalamir next to her as they marched her out of the baking noon sun and into the atmosphere controlled lobby.
"Keep moving," the captain poked her in the back with his blaster. "Squads two and three stay here and continue to guard the door."
"Why…" Jysella started to ask, but received a brief whack upside the back of her head.
"No talking, Jedi."
Jysella grimaced and allowed the captain and his squad to escort her into the turbolift. After several long seconds, they reached the top floor. The door to the Diktat's office was open, and they could hear voices coming from it.
"You promised us that Centerpoint would be ready to fire on the Galactic Alliance. Was that not a lie?"
"It wasn't a lie, your grace. Centerpoint *will* be operational. We're just trying to construct the right…bio-genetic key to reactivate it."
"You led us to believe that if we kept you in power, Centerpoint would be ours immediately."
"Good things come to those who wait, Great One. The war's not going to be over any time soon. I promise you'll have your system-destroying weapon before the year is out."
"I have waited long enough," the Yuuzhan Vong's voice growled in rough Basic. "You have misrepresented yourself, misrepresented the capabilities of your fleet."

"Now see here! I did nothing of the sort…"
"If your people were competent, Duro would once again be ours."
"And if yours were any better, you wouldn't have lost Duro in the first place."
"Watch your tongue. You are not so important that we cannot replace you."
"See here, I will not be threatened in my own office, on *my* home planet. *I* am the Diktat of Corellia, you will answer to me!"
Jysella briefly wondered if Corellia would soon be looking for a new Diktat without her little groups' plan. To her surprise, however, the Intendant backed down.
"Very well, Diktat. But I hope for your sake that your fleets and Centerpoint become functional sooner than later. If reports are true, the Galactic Alliance forces are making another push for your planet. I dare say they will be most displeased with your sudden change of heart. And since you have just proven that Corellia is useless to us for the near future, we have no reason to protect you. If the Galactic Alliance force do come, we will be forced to destroy Centerpoint ourselves, since we can hardly allow the infidels to have it once more."
"Get…out…of…my office."
The Yuuzhan Vong and a small entourage left, not even paying Jysella and her escort a second glance as they filled the turbolift and descended out of sight.
"Diktat," the CorSec captain called out.
"What is it?"
"It's Captain Rhogane, building security chief, sir. We've captured a Jedi trying to disrupt your meeting with the Yuuzhan Vong."
Jysella gave the captain an incredulous eye roll, and promptly received another smack on the back of her head.
"Jedi?" Thrackan Sal-Solo said, his mood changing in an instant. "Bring the Jedi in."
Jysella entered the office with the six-member CorSec unit. The office was opulent, decorated with luxury goods from all over the galaxy. Seated behind a desk of the blackest of woods was the Diktat himself, eyes alight with eagerness. On either side of the desk, and standing by a row of bay windows, were several other politicians who shared Thrackan Sal-Solo's mindset. They too appeared excited at the news of a Jedi being captured.
All their expressions faded, however, when they saw Jysella.
"She's a Jedi?"

"That's what Major Kiran of the Serious Criminal Apprehension Unit said." The CorSec officer held up Jysella's lightsaber. "This is her Jedi weapon."
Thrackan took the lightsaber and looked it over in fascination. Out of curiosity, he twiddled with the blade-length and thickness adjusting dials, before pressing the button that activated the weapon. He quickly let out a yelp and jerked in surprise at the sudden appearance of the glowing blue blade. His inexperience and surprise had him swing the deadly beam of energy across the room, and he ended up slicing his expensive looking desk, his leather chair, and a lamp in two before he shut off the blade. Thrackan did his best to look dignified as he sat down on another nearby chair and smoothed out his outfit.
Jysella couldn't help but giggle. Something that didn't help Thrackan's mood. He glared at her and then motioned to the guards. "Leave the ysalamir here and go fetch Kotsah. Tell him I have a Jedi he can give to his gods."
"You'll be alright, sir?"
"Please, without her Force and lightsaber, she's just an impudent little girl," Thrackan scoffed. "I'm sure the ruling council and I can watch her for the few minutes it takes for you to go up and down a turbolift."
"As you say, sir." The captain saluted, and he and his men obeyed the Diktat's command.
Jysella remained standing in the center of the office, watching Thrackan and the other politicians in the room with an almost bored expression.
"You Jedi are far more trouble than you're worth," Thrackan sighed, setting the ysalamir cage at his feet. "So little girl, what do you have to say for yourself? This is probably your last day among the living."
"The Diktat is an idiot," Jysella recited dutifully, seeing one of the politicians hide a smirk.
Just as the Diktat's face began to redden, the cage at his feet erupted as a small, voice-activated fragmentation charge ripped it apart. Before the Diktat or any of the others could recover, a YT-1300 Corellian freighter swooped down in front of the wide bay windows of the office. A tow-cable was shot out, and the freighter literally ripped the entire wall panel of transparasteel clean from the building.
The racket was deafening, and a cloud of dust and debris was thrown into the air. Jysella dove for her lightsaber, and then tumbled out of the way as parts of the ceiling came crashing down.
At the same time, Thrackan promptly scrambled behind his desk and hit several buttons. A squadron of advanced looking security droids

promptly entered the room and lowered their weapons at the breach, while an alarm blared noisily throughout the building.
A blazing blade of bronze sliced through the debris and smoke as Lowbacca plunged into the metal squadron. The startled security droids were promptly decimated by the one-Wookie wrecking crew. One of the droids tried to hit Lowbacca with its blaster, only to have its arm torn out of its socket and used to whack its head from the rest of the body. By the time the last droid fell, a crawling Thrackan was trying to disappear out his office door.
"Going somewhere?" Jysella asked, holding her saber in front of Thrackan's pale face. In the background, Lowbacca was busy applying binders to the wrists of the other politicians and heaving them unceremoniously out the window and into the ship.
Thrackan's eyes darted left and right. "Errr…no?"
"That's what I thought."
"You're making a big mistake!"
"[Yeah, yeah,]" Lowbacca chuffed, lifting Thrackan up by the collar of his shirt. "[And you'll get us for this, and we won't get out of here alive, and you have friends in high places. That's what everyone else said, something new please.]"
Face to face with an angry-looking Wookie, Thrackan's eyes rolled up into the back of his head and he passed out.
"Let's go people!" Danielle called out from the *Century Hawk*.
Both Jedi leaped from the office and into the freighter just as the door to the room opened and a battalion of security forces poured in. The *Century Hawk*'s ramp closed amidst a hail of blaster fire, and the freighter shot off and out of sight.
0-[V]-0 0-[V]-0
Jysella scrambled into the cockpit of the *Century Hawk* as Lowbacca secured their unwilling passengers, nodding to both Myn and Kirney.
"Welcome back," Kirney said lightly, interrupting her brief comm-chat with someone else.
"Any trouble?" Jysella settled into the empty passenger seat. The other one was already occupied by Tarc, who gave her a small wave.
"Nope, I think your dad and great grandpa actually had a hand in that," Tarc replied. "Just before we pulled down that wall, we got word from the Admiral of the CorSec fleet. He's ready to begin firing on the Yuuzhan Vong vessels left in this system the minute we give the word."
The freighter rocked as several flashes of yellow plasma blazed by the cockpit.
"Please tell me the word's already been given."

"Yup," Myn acknowledged. "You don't think those coralskippers are firing on us because they fear for the Diktat's health, do you?"
A flight of Corellian-based fighters swooped down and chased away the coralskippers. At the same time, Myn took the freighter into a sharp loop, giving them all a view of Coronet city. Explosions and flashes of light were sparking all through the massive urban center of Corellia. From all over the place CorSec soldiers and local militiamen streamed out and engaged the Yuuzhan Vong in the streets. Massive holo-screens set up throughout the street were displaying a group of politicians calling themselves the 'True Sons of Corellia,' urging everyone to rise up and defend their homes.
"Oh wow," Jysella swallowed.
The freighter continued upwards into space, and Jysella's jaw dropped again. It appeared as if the entire system was locked in one giant battle. All of Corellia's military vessels had converged on the system and were engaging the Yuuzhan Vong fleet currently stationed there. With most of the Yuuzhan Vong vessels of their original fleet having moved on to places like Duro, only a small holding force had been left behind. And that holding force was definitely fighting for their lives.
"Receiving incoming transmission," Kirney said with a small smile. "It's for you, Jedi Horn."
"Hello?" Jysella said hesitantly, taking the headset.
"*You doing okay, Sella?"*
"Daddy! Where are you?"
"Notice the big scary Corellian cruiser being rammed by the smaller suicidal Yuuzhan Vong picketship?"
Jysella scanned the battle. "Uh huh."
"We'll I'm in an X-wing protecting that cruiser."
"You're not doing too good a job," Jysella said with a choked laugh.
"I've heard from Rostek that you managed to pick up our beloved Diktat. Any trouble?"
"Nope, none at all. Now concentrate on your job, daddy. I'm okay. What we need to do is chase these Yuuzhan Vong away now."
"Couldn't have said it better myself, Sella. The Corellia Defense Force may look like they outnumber the Vong, but they have more experience hunting smugglers and pirates than engaging a fully equipped military fleet. As good as things look now, this battle is far from over."
0-[VI]-0 0-[VI]-0
Ganner glanced over his shoulder from his position on a very comfy couch as the door chime to his room sounded. Both he and Natua had been given a luxury suite, complete with giant beds with golden

frames and silken sheets. The walls were white marble with tiny crystals embedded within, and everything seemed to just glitter in the sunlight, including the crystalline toilet. Corulag interim government had spared no expenses for either of them, and after Bastion, Ganner was definitely getting used to being pampered. A full day had already passed since meeting the council, and they had been treated like royalty every minute of it.

"Enter." Ganner called out as the door chime rang again.

A rather important and heavily scarred looking Yuuzhan Vong strode through the doors, escorted by a handful of warriors of lesser importance. Natua, who had sensed their arrival, emerged from a side room and glanced at Ganner anxiously.

Ganner, however, smiled and stood. He took two steps, then kneeled in front of the important looking Yuuzhan Vong.

"Commander Oz'galathsha Shen'g, I presume? I am Peace Brigade Director…"

"I do not care," the Yuuzhan Vong snarled.

"I am honored that you have seen fit to visit my humble quarters in person," Ganner went on, as if hadn't heard a word. "The presence of the great and powerful Oz before me gives me courage, gives me heart, to do what must be done."

"If I could only give you a brain as well! What nonsense are you spewing!" The Yuuzhan Vong snarled darkly. "What is this about a hundred-thousand slave tithe? Or your so called commands from Shimrra?"

"Oh," Ganner looked contrite as he looked up the commander. "I…I would have thought Shimrra believed you worthy of the news, Oz."

"It's Commander Oz'galathsha Shen'g! And again with the nonsense! What news is this? Speak sanely or I will kill you where you stand. As a loyal Peace Brigade commander, you should be happy I give you a quick death."

"Well, Commander Sheng," Ganner said. "I come from Yuuzhan'tar with orders from the Supreme Commander. Either the messenger carrying those orders to this system was lost in the conflict that fills this galaxy or the Dread One simply did not think the matter important enough for someone in your high position.

I am simply here to gather a great many slaves for the grand sacrifice he has planned on Yuuzhan'tar. Surely you do not need to bother yourself with slave collection? It is a task far beneath you, great one. Send word to Yuuzhan'tar if you must, but please do not delay this shipment. The Dread One was most insistent I deliver these slaves as soon as possible, for the gods demand their lives."

Oz'galathsha's jaw worked several time, but who was he to argue with Shimrra or the gods. Finally, he said in a less excitable voice. "Very well, Director. But do not cross my path or interfere with my running of this planet. I will not be so merciful if you do."
"Thank you, great one," Ganner bowed low.
The Yuuzhan Vong commander spun dramatically and left the room. It was only then that Natua remembered to breathe evenly.
Ganner gave her a wry, supportive grin. "See, even the Vong is impressed with the greatness that is Rhysode."
"And how did you become so good at this again?" Natua asked, glancing at her red reflection in a full-length mirror on the door. Over the past day, with a small shopping trip, she had made some artistic adjustments to the cloak and robes she was wearing to look more, in Ganner's words, 'Xizor-like.' She wasn't sure if looking like a feared crime lord was a good thing, but she had to admit that she liked her new, sharper look.
"Well," Ganner sank back into the couch. "I spent about three months on Borleias with Wraith Squadron. There they taught me how to manipulate and be a deceitful sneaky person. Their members also gave me insight into Vong psyche. Then I spent little over a year with Imperial Intelligence. There I learned how to act superior than everyone, or act inferior and secretly harbor grudges against those that *think* they're superior to me. And I've also had to spend that time thinking like a Vong to track down hidden Vong. Oh, and I'm just naturally that good."
Natua managed a very faint smile as she shook her head ruefully. "I don't think I'll ever meet another Jedi like you, Ganner."
"I should hope not," Ganner winked. "This galaxy's crazy enough already."
"A wise Jedi you are indeed."
"Yup. Now we still have a day or two before they round up all the freighter crews we'll be meeting. What do you say we take advantage of that all-you-can-eat buffet downstairs?"
Natua inclined her head. "After you, Director Wan Tu."
"Thank you, Rhysode," Ganner laughed, swinging his newly bought flashy black cape around his shoulders as he open the door to their shared suite. "I think you'll go far in the Peace Brigade."
"It's my life's goal, sir," Natua continued to play along, straight-faced.
They passed by several members of the puppet government in silence.
"Sir."
"Yes?"
"How do you think the *other* Zekk is doing?"

"Well," Ganner said glibly. "I'm sure he's enjoying this planet just as much as we are. I mean, why wouldn't he?"

0-[VII]-0 0-[VII]-0

Zekk had absolutely no desire to return to Corulag; not unless things changed drastically. The Corulag rebel movement had been hard pressed to the very lower reaches of the urban sprawls and bamboo forests. They had lost lots of people and resources during the failed uprisings, and were living off scraps. His bed for the night had been a soggy-looking, dirt-covered spring mattress, and his meal had been a relatively unappetizing military ration. The constant noise that filtered down from the upper city, and the oily exhaust fumes that permeated the lower regions of the city ensured that he had barely gotten a wink of sleep. Even now he could still taste the oil atmosphere on his tongue.

"You'll get used to it," Mallie said lightly, holding up a cup of purified water for him. "Helps if you use a Force cleansing bubble and meditate for a bit."

"Thanks," Zekk took the cup. "I'll try it later to night."

Mallie grinned and took a seat next to him. "Took my dad I and a full week to work out that solution. We're both more into cutting our ways through problems than thinking our way out of them."

"I have several friends who are like that," Zekk laughed softly.

"You should have seen us. We were complete terrors to our enemies *and* allies until we were able to get a decent night's rest," Mallie trailed off whimsically, staring up at the distant patch of blue sky through all the metal work and wires that stretched meters above them. Corulag may not have been Coruscant, but parts of its more populated areas could go fairly deep into the ground. "Sometimes I wonder if we'll ever be able to set Corulag right again. And even if we do, how long that'll last"

Zekk empathized with her. The nineteen-year old white-blond haired woman had grown up entirely on Corulag with her mother, father, and brother. She and her family had become the 'local Jedi,' doing for Corulag what the Order tried to do for the rest of the galaxy. Through brief conversations with the young woman, Zekk had learned that she had spent most her life helping her dad right the wrongs of the planet, make it a better place. But then the Yuuzhan Vong had come and wiped all that out. Undid all the hard work, made everything wrong again.

It was hard and demoralizing, watching your family's life's work just go up in flames before your very eyes. Seeing the criminals you had sought to put away run free again, the people you had helped, die.

While the Galactic Alliance made gains in other parts of the galaxy, Corulag continued to decay, the situation continued to look more and more hopeless by the day.
"That's the interesting thing about Jedi, I think," Zekk said softly, leaning back on his hands. His stomach grumbled from emptiness, but he ignored it as he focused on the distant patch of sky. "We're supposed to be the galaxy's defenders, fighting a perpetual battle against darkness. If something bad happens, we say it's because of the will of the Force and try to adapt. Something good happens, and we know that that good is only temporary." He glanced at the young woman next to him. "To use a Mon Cal metaphor, this galaxy is like a beach sitting on the edge of an ocean. We can create what we want from the sands, build up walls to protect it the best we can, but eventually the ocean will claim what belongs to it. The important thing is to appreciate and celebrate what is there when we can and know that, while it can be swept aside so effortlessly, it can be rebuilt again. As Jedi, we are comforted by the fact that any lives loss return to the Force. We see the worst in people, but also the best. Despite everything I've gone through, despite losing friends, doing things I regret, I still believe everything will turn out better in the end. We just have to stay strong, keep hope, both for our own sakes, but also for all those who see the Jedi as leaders and role models."
"Next time I'm making a sandcastle that will last a lot longer," Mallie smiled faintly, tears at the corners of her eyes. "Maybe make a dozen little sand Jedi to ward off the waves and give the poor people inside my castle just a little bit longer."
"That's the idea."
"You know the downside to being a Jedi?" Mallie asked, her Imperial accent thick as she wiped at her tears. "That we'll never be able to be *normal* at all. Have a normal childhood, teenage years, or even life. Being a Jedi isn't a job, it's a lifestyle. One we've never really had any choice about since we were born. It's not like we can just quit and give our position to another person. I mean, we have the power to make a difference, to make this galaxy a better place, and when things go bad *everyone* seems to look to you to solve their problems. What are you going to tell them? 'Sorry I can't help you right now, why don't you try someone from the security forces, from the government?' 'Come back tomorrow, I don't feel like helping you today?'" Mallie blinked, then as if realizing what she was saying, let out a small embarrassed laugh. "Oh Force, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go on like that. I mean, we only met yesterday, I and I just came to bring you some water, and now you probably think I'm some type of hosepipe or…"

"No, it's okay," Zekk said quickly.
"Sorry," Mallie repeated, hanging her head in shame. "It's just outside of dad and Rahm, you're actually the first Jedi I've ever met…and that you'd…I don't know, understand. I'm not like father or Rahm, and they don't really get that I can't just compartmentalize the pain and suffering I've seen on a daily basis for the past three years like they do. Mom's not Force sensitive so she can't *feel* that pain the way I do. Sometimes I feel like I'll go insane from just…everything. And father… well he said that if I talked to you, maybe I'll find some way to…you know." Mallie trailed off, looking up at him with pained confusion in her eyes.
"I've often felt the same way," Zekk exhaled. "I never really had a family, growing up as an orphan on the streets. Fortunately for me, though, I've had my friends at my side the entire way. Jaina, Jacen, Tenel Ka, Lowbacca, and so many more. Whenever things got tough, I used my Force bond with them to bleed off some of the frustration and pain I was feeling. They've become my family, through the good and the bad. Even Ganner, he has his way of being larger than life, making the good great, and the bad ridiculous. We all support each other, keep each other going even when we see our sandcastles knocked down again and again."
"That sounds amazing," Mallie whispered.
Zekk smiled. "It is. If you want, the next time we have time to meditate, I can introduce you to the meld we have. Even across star systems, we still keep in touch with each other, make sure all is well."
Mallie looked away, hiding a watery smile as she nodded. "I'd like that very much. We have time later this afternoon, just before we create that safe-house by the spaceport. Maybe then?"
"Sure," Zekk said. "After all, no matter where we are in this crazy galaxy we're in, we Jedi look after each other."
0-[VIII]-0 0-[VIII]-0
The battle for Corellia was in full swing when the Galactic Alliance forces dropped out of hyperspace. They hadn't been quite sure what to expect en route, and the sight before them was definitely not anything they were prepared for. Despite their numbers, the Corellians were being pushed back on all fronts and taking heavy casualties. From several clouds of smoke drifting up from the planet and visible from space, it was clear that the battle wasn't solely confined to the stars.
"The Corellians are firing on the Vong again?" General Panib blinked in disbelief. "How many fracking times are they going to change sides?"
"General," Valin said tersely. "My little sister and father are in the middle of that mess."

General Panib glanced at the sixteen year old Jedi Knight. "You're certain?"
"Positive," Valin could feel his sister's excitement and brief greeting. "They're trying to stop the Yuuzhan Vong over there from breaking the Corellian's left flank."
"Well if you're sure the Corellians won't shoot us in the back again. Helm, set a course for the Corellian's flank and have the Freed Yuuzhan Vong follow us in. Inform General Antilles what we're doing and have him wrap around the enemy Vong formation if he can. Jedi Horn, keep your link up with Antilles' Jedi. Let me know if they need our help."
"Yes sir."
"Hopefully this time we can actually keep the territory we've gained," General Panib muttered as the allied fleets pushed forward.
In no time at all, turbolaser batteries opened fire, spitting their deadly beams of energy into the outnumbered Yuuzhan Vong forces. The Corellian flank, which had been a hairsbreadth away from collapsing in on itself, quickly squirted out of the predicament it had been in and rolled itself into the ranks of their fast-approaching allies.
"Receiving message from the damaged cruiser."
"Go ahead."
"*This is Thunderfall, Rostek Horn speaking. Thank you for the assist,"* the aged hologram of the old man appeared before General Panib.
"Horn? Any relation to Valin Horn?" General Panib glanced over to Valin, whose eyes were closed and fluttering as he helped coordinate fleet movements.
"My great grandson. He with you?"
"Yes sir," General Panib said, reflexively deferring to the older officer. It was saying something that in his late sixties, General Panib still felt like a child in Rostek's presence. "He's working with the other Jedi at the moment to make sure the Vong don't have anything else up their sleeves."
"General!" Valin suddenly called out, his eyes springing open. He blinked at the image of his great grandfather, but then quickly shook himself. "General, we have to stop those four ships making a run for the planet! Now that the Vong know the battle is lost, they're playing their skifter!"
"Four ships?" General Panib looked on the sensor grid, which showed three Mataloks escorting an odd-shaped vessel towards Corellia. The Mataloks were large enough, and their fighter escort numerous enough, that they were easily shrugging off Corellian attempts to slow them.

"Now!" Valin said urgently.
General Panib whirled around. "You heard the Jedi, break contact and pursue those ships!"
The contact break wasn't the smoothest. Several fighter groups and light cruisers were suddenly trapped behind enemy lines and destroyed. Another Bakuran destroyer was ripped in two by enemy fire. Valin grimaced as he felt the deaths of the crews aboard each ship, but was unable to tear his eyes away from the screen.
On the opposite end of the allied fleet, elements of General Antilles' forces were likewise breaking formation, but they were further away.
"We're reading three Mataloks, sir. But sensors can't identify the fourth vessel. Analyst think it's some type of seedship."
"Used in Vongforming?" General Panib frowned, steadying himself as their ship was rocked by another violent barrage.
"It's no regular seedship," Valin whispered hoarsely. He whirled around to look out the bridge, shaking his head in terror as pods began to fly out from under the irregular vessel. "You have to destroy those pods. Even if you can't get a clear target lock, take them out!"
"Do as he says," General Panib nodded. "Jedi Horn, what is it?"
"I watched the vids of the genocide on Bastion," Valin said softly. "A ship just like that one released a human-specific virus into the planet's atmosphere and killed off a majority of the population."
Long range laser batteries tried in vain to take out every single pod being released by the modified seedship, yet the coralskippers protecting the seedship were flying directly into their path and buying time the allied fleets could ill-afford to lose.
"Rostek Horn," General Panib whirled around back to the holotransmitter. "You have to get the planetary defense batteries online."
"Trying to do that at the moment," Rostek grunted. *"Several guard units are still siding with the recently deposed Diktat. Skrag those frinkin idiots, they're going to be the death of us all!"*
"Grandpa, we don't have much time left," Valin said, his heart racing as the last of the pods left the seedship.
"Hush, you don't rush a hundred and seventeen year old man, Valin," Rostek said, the panicked tension in his voice despite his words. *"I didn't live this long just to watch my homeworld get turned into a graveyard. There! I've managed to convince one of those boys in firing control that I had more authority than the Chief of State himself. Poor kid, he's the only one still at his station and I just turned that poor rodder into a hero."*

The planetary defense network came to life in a blaze of green, and the seedpods that had been on the verge of unleashing their deadly payloads over the entire planet were immediately incinerated, payload and all. At the same time, General Antilles' forces somehow managed to catch up with General Panib's fleet, and their combined barrages of death tore apart the three Mataloks and seedship.
Nearly the entire bridge let out breaths of relief, with General Panib emitting a wry laugh and collapsing back into the nearest chair. "That was too close."
"You're telling me," Valin exhaled, closing his eyes and lying back on the deck.
"Yuuzhan Vong forces are pulling out, sir," the sensor operator's own joy at the narrow escape from tragedy clear in his energetic report.
"Good, let them go," General Panib nodded. "Get some marines together and have them go planetside to help the Corellians tidy up the place."
"Yes, sir!"
"Well, Jedi Horn," General Panib chuckled, looking over his armrest to the horizontal Jedi. "We have your homeworld back again."
Valin opened his eyes and weakly looked at General Panib with a relieved smile. "I'm never doing this again."
0-[IX]-0 0-[IX]-0
Shaeri and Ahsi led the group of shapers through the tampasi and to the yawning chasm where the hyperdrives had been installed on Zonama Sekot. It was a gaping valley of sorts, with rocky archways spanning from one end to the next in a naturalistic scaffold. The remains of the *Blessed by the Jedi* could be seen precariously balanced between several of the lower stone bridges, beneath the massive monoliths that were Zonama Sekot's hyperdrive engines. A majority of the Matalok had survived, though the hull was blackened and appeared to be still bubbling and steaming as it rested in a rocky outcropping.
And at first glance at the area, it was clear that something was not right.
The living matter that surrounded the hyperdrives was rapidly blackening and falling away. The path the careening ship blazed through the sky was still visible, but everywhere its debris had fallen, the plant and animal life had shriveled and died.
Ahsi and Shaeri exchanged uncertain glances.
"The re-entry of the Matalok should not be causing the die off," Ahsi said, kneeling near a sick-looking plant.

"This has to be a reason Sekot abandoned our discussions." Shaeri agreed.
"Look!" One of the shapers called out, pointing back to the ship. "There's someone alive down there!"
The group crept towards the ledge and followed the pointing finger. Despite the depth the *Blessed by the Jedi* had fallen, they could indeed see someone stagger out of the vessel and collapse.
"Set up a medical station," Ahsi commanded the others. "Shaeri, I understand your desire to help, but with your lame leg, you would only slow us down. We have to discover what happened onboard that ship."
Shaeri made a face but nodded. "I'll stay and help set up the medical station."
"Good," Ahsi gestured to two of the shapers who had come with them. "You and you, come with me."

0-[X]-0 0-[X]-0

The rapid descent of the *Blessed by the Jedi* wasn't missed by any of the crowd it had passed over back in the main clearing. Bits and pieces of ash, coral, and other parts from the once flagship of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong fleet, had come raining down in droves. Add to the fact was that Sekot's persona had literally vanished a second into the hale of decay, and a hushed panic began to simmer.
"Please tell me that wasn't what I thought it was," Mara said, staring at a larger piece of the Matalok on the ground.
Taan, completely pale, kept her gaze skywards as the minutes ticked by. "How…how was this possible? He was only one person."
"Do you think Nom Anor was trying to ram the *Blessed by the Jedi* into the planet's hyperdrive?" Jaina spoke up. "That was the ship's course."
"It's worse!" Danni Quee's voice was full of fear and caused everyone to turn towards her.
"Worse?" Luke questioned.
"Look," Danni whispered, pointing with a shaky hand to the mass gathering of Freed Yuuzhan Vong on the others side of the riverbank.
The Jedi, Taan, and the fortunate few with them all blanched at the sight. All around the trail of debris left by the crashing ship, Yuuzhan Vong were collapsing by the dozens, their faces ashen. Black sores and blisters covered their skin, with bubbling boils and rashes breaking out all over. Some went to aid the others, but soon they too were equally stricken.
To the horror of the onlookers, a Yuuzhan Vong child picked up a piece of the downed Matalok and took it to her mother. A few minutes went by and soon both mother and daughter were coughing up black blood and convulsing on the ground. Moans and cries of pain and despair

began to fill the air as the crowd of thousands began to drop one by one.
"It's Omega Blue, or at least the Yuuzhan Vong version of it," Danni whispered hoarsely.
"No," Tahiri whimpered, gripping Anakin's hands tightly as she shook her head in denial. "No, no, no."
One of the shuttles in contact with a larger piece of debris began to blacken, the coral decaying at an alarming rate. The grass around the affected area likewise began to dissolve, and mayhem broke out. Screams of terror, of pain, the joyous festivities that had been occurring non-stop for the past few days grinding to an immediate halt. People were scrambling one way or another. Some tried to help the ill, only to catch the lethal contagion themselves. Others dove back into their shuttles and tried to take off. But in the packed clearing, the genetically modified virus spread quickly.
Taan collapsed to her knees in abject horror, her arms limply at her sides. "What have I done?"
"Supreme Leader! Supreme Leader!"
The group turned to see several shapers running at them at a rapid pace. Behind the shapers, rapidly becoming one with the planet again, was the Sekotian vessel they had been loaned.
"Supreme…" the shapers ground to a halt at the mass death occurring only a few meters away on the other side of the river. "Gods no!"
"What is it?" Jacen said firmly.
"Avatar of Yun-Yammka, we were sent by Shaeri Jamaane and Master Shaper Ahsi Yim to get help. They were going to go to the crash site and see if there were any survivors."
Despite the cacophony on the other side of the river bank, the group of Jedi and their friends were deathly quiet.
"What?" Tahiri finally managed.
"Shaeri and Ahsi, they were leading the rest of us to the crash site in hopes of caring for any survivors," the shaper said almost mechanically, still transfixed on the blackened fields of grass and mounds of corpses forming. "But they didn't know about…this."
Tahiri emitted a rattling breath and immediately took off running in the direction of the crash site.
"I'll go with her!" Anakin shouted, already sprinting. "Get a quarantine set up. If anyone of them take the virus back to the rest of the fleet…"
"We'll handle it," Jacen said grimly, leaping over the river and striding into the panic-stricken crowds. He shifted into Vongsense and began to reach out with it. The urgency of the situation caused his abilities to flare in a new level of desperation as he tried to emit a blanket level of

calmness to help restore order. Normally the Yuuzhan Vong wouldn't be affected the Force, yet Jacen had somehow attuned himself to Zonama Sekot's Force presence and was using the planet's bond with the Yuuzhan Vong to his advantage. It was almost like Kalee all over again, as he tapped into the wealth of Force energy that the planet contained to reach out across its surface. He wasn't even aware he was doing it, only that the need was dire and that the consequences of a continuously panicked crowd were too severe to think about.
"Jaina, take your Sekotian ship and let the fleet know what's happening," Jacen called back out. "On the off-chance the virus mutated and has somehow become dormant in them, they can't be allowed to leave this system either."
"On it!" Jaina nodded, looking to her Ferroan guides. They motioned back to their own airship and they were soon off towards Jaina's landing site.
The remaining Ferroans quickly went to work to assist Jacen. During the Great Crossings, they had experienced all sorts of plague, famine, and disaster, and their experience was coming in handy. Teams went to work starting a brief triage, though that ended when they realized the virus was killing faster than they had ever seen.
Luke and Mara did what they could to help establish a perimeter, and Danni pulled out a portable villip and was rapidly talking with other shaper teams out in the field. Taan stayed on the opposite side of the bank, her eyes wide, whimpering to herself as she watched the people she had lead die in the most horrific way possible. She silently prayed that she was dreaming, that this was some sort of cruel hoax set up by Yun-Harla.
Even then, the death continued.
The Jedi and Ferroans were helpless to stop the highly contagious, fast acting virus from spreading. Once infected, the ill began to feel its effects within minutes. This was long enough for the afflicted to get further away from the core of the outbreak and affect others. Several of the shuttles that had taken off again began to crash back down to the planet as its coral surface bubbled and liquefied. This only caused the panic to rise up again.
Some began to whimper fears that the gods were punishing them. That they had been wrong to leave Shimrra after all. Others called on Jacen, Luke, and Mara to use their powers to help them, to stop the dying. All the three of them could do was offer comfort as they helplessly went from one afflicted Yuuzhan Vong to the next.
Within seconds, the joyous homecoming for the Yuuzhan Vong had turned into a nightmare of unimaginable terror. And within an hour, the

wails of pain and terror began to fall silent as death took hold of nearly all of the twenty-five thousand Yuuzhan Vong on the planet's surface. Minutes after that hour passed, the Jedi and Ferroans were standing in the middle of a graveyard.

0-[XI]-0 0-[XI]-0

Tahiri's desperation rang loud and clear in the Force as she sprinted through the jungle. She had switched over to Vongphase, could feel the mass of Yuuzhan Vong life behind her go out one by one. That only made her sprint harder, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she frantically tried to reach the distant hyperdrive engines. She couldn't believe how much things could change. Couldn't understand how something so right could go so wrong. And now her fear for her closest Yuuzhan Vong friend and her newly found 'sister' sent her heart rate skyrocketing.

"Please, Force, gods," Tahiri panted, frustrated tears leaking out of her eyes as she forced her legs to work.

The chasm with the hyperdrive was a full two day's walk away. Anakin and the others hadn't wanted to offend any of the Yuuzhan Vong by having such a glaring non-organic tech so close to their newer cities. And at the time, that had seemed like a wise choice. But as the twigs and branches whipped across her face and cut her feet, Tahiri cursed the distance repeatedly.

The gas giant in the sky once again passed between the sun and Zonama Sekot, plunging the planet into darkness.

Tahiri kept her senses stretched out, she could still feel the slight presence of the group of shapers that Shaeri had left with. Barely. The seconds ticked by overly long, sweat soaking her tunic. Finally, she began to near her goal. As she did, though, those few signs of Yuuzhan Vong life began to extinguish. On her final approach to the canyon, she began to see the blackened remains of Sekotian life. There was no sign of the bioluminescence that lit up the rest of the tampasi, only darkness. Only death. Whole swaths of land were devoid of life, pitch dark in the middle of the night.

Fearfully, Tahiri slowed and activated her lightsaber. Its blue light flooded the area and provided the faintest of illumination. Her bare feet glided across soil and the decomposing remains of the plantlife that had once been abundant in the region. The light of her lightsaber brought to her attention the still blistering body of one of the Sekotian's quadruped creatures.

"Shaeri!" Tahiri called out into the darkness. "Shaeri!"

Her voice was only answered by a haunting echo. Not one soul was left.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, her hands shaking, she staggered out of the dead zone and saw the makeshift medical station the shapers had set up. There was a body on the ground, and Tahiri frantically went up to it. She turned it over and it was revealed to be one of the shapers.
She frantically looked back up, holding out her lightsaber. There were several more bodies all strewn about, another lay out on a makeshift table. With great apprehension, she checked each of them. When she got to the last body, she recoiled in terror.
There was no life left in Ahsi Yim's blood-filled eyes. Tahiri let out a sob, holding a hand to her mouth as her legs gave out. In Tahiri's heart she knew that Ahsi wasn't her real sister, yet her mind continued to tell her otherwise. She had gotten to know Ahsi in the trip over and had actually enjoyed the older Yuuzhan Vong's outlook on life and things in general. Tahiri could remember the face, now contorted in a permanent expression of pain, light up with joy at seeing the *Veila* for the first time. Could remember the awestruck wonder and childlike expression of glee at setting foot on Zonama Sekot.
Tears continued to flow and Tahiri desperately looked around the clearing for one last person. She still had hope, as foolish as it was, that she would find Shaeri alive and well.
"Shaeri, please," Tahiri plead softly, her body slumping in despair. "Please."
Tahiri heard a rasping sound and her head jerked up. She swung her lightsaber around with frantic, trembling hand, her heart racing. Then she froze. There, in the pale blue pall of her lightsaber, slumped against a large boulder, was one last Yuuzhan Vong. She was covered in bloody blisters and sores, with black blood dribbling from her mouth. Despite this, however, the Yuuzhan Vong's chest rose and fell with a weak raspy breath.
Tahiri gasped. "Shaeri!"
0-[Chapter Break]-0
A\N: A cliff hanger. The next chapter won't be up until two Mondays from now. Great combination, huh. Don't forget to leave a review. Only a single month of aDA left!

ADA 59

Fifty-Nine
0-[I]-0 0-[I]-0
Tahiri turned off her lightsaber and scrambled to Shaeri's side, all sorts of emotions, ranging from the joy of seeing Shaeri still alive, to the

despair of knowing just how badly she was suffering, flashing through the blond Jedi in an instant. "Shaeri."
The young Yuuzhan Vong teen weakly turned her head.
"Don't move!" Tahiri said with a sob, quickly gathering her friend in a protective hug. "Don't move, I'm here."
"Ta..hi…ri," Shaeri managed to get out in three pained breaths.
"I'm here," Tahiri whimpered, her Vongphase allowing her to connect with the younger teen in her arms on a level the Force would never allow her. "I'm here."
"Help," Shaeri croaked. "It hurts."
Tahiri closed her eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks. She was a Jedi, the Avatar of Yun-Shuno, and she couldn't even help her best Yuuzhan Vong friend. Tahiri was no scientist, no doctor, and all she could do was cry silently as she felt Shaeri slowly die in her arms.
"I'll try," Tahiri sniffled, trying in vain to come up with something, anything, to ease Shaeri's suffering. "Just hang in there, Shaeri. I'll make everything better somehow. I promise."
Tahiri tenderly held her friend, her own breaths just as ragged as she tried her best to comfort the suffering Yuuzhan Vong teen in her arms. And then, as she instinctively reached out to Anakin for comfort, the solution came to her.
It had only been a short while ago on Dagobah that she had decided to try the Force from Anakin's point of view. And she was on what was probably the strongest concentration of Force energy anywhere in the galaxy. She shifted out of Vongphase and began to concentrate on Shaeri in the Force.
Focusing on her feelings for Shaeri, Tahiri began to embrace her own emotions, began to walk into that shadowy corner of her own heart and draw upon her inner strength. Her desire to keep Shaeri alive, to rid Shaeri of the pain she was feeling, merged with her fear of losing a part of her family, and her anger at being unable to do anything. Rage, fear, selfishness bolstered her own abilities, the emotions seemingly intensifying as she fell back on them. She *wouldn't* lose Shaeri. Not to Nom Anor's treachery, not to anyone. Her fear and anger gave way to her hatred of the situation, hatred of the war that was trying to take away everyone she held dear. She couldn't allow it.
She *wouldn't* allow it.
Only Shaeri would decide when it was her time, and the fact that the younger teen was still alive when the others shapers in the clearing were dead was proof that Shaeri wanted to live on still. Tahiri's love for her friend mixed in with the darker emotions, her mind waging war with her heart. Nothing in the Jedi teachings would enable her to save

Shaeri, but she wasn't going to dirty Shaeri by delving into forbidden practices either. She would use aspects of both sides, her emotions to fuel her abilities, but her mind to channel that strength so that only the positive would emerge.

And with that decision, Tahiri gave herself to the Force; the light and the dark. Her body emitted a small nimbus of golden energy as she sat in the darkness with Shaeri's enfeebled form tucked against her own. There was emotion, but there was peace. There was anger, but there was also serenity.

There was no death, only the Force.

Guided by the Force, Tahiri worked the Force into Shaeri's body, infusing every cell with its cleansing energy. Even if she couldn't *see* Shaeri in the Force, Tahiri continued to direct the golden nimbus of Force energy into the figure tucked safely in her arms.

The blond Jedi concentrated, focusing, willing, hoping, her friend back to health. She would purge Shaeri of the virus eating away at her body. She would make Shaeri whole again. Grounded in the Force with the help of the vastness that was Zonama Sekot, Tahiri began to shift into Vongphase. With her emotions and desperation motivating her, she effortlessly achieved the equilibrium that Anakin had struggled so long and hard to achieve. She was balanced between Vongsense and the Force, between light and dark, able to feel Shaeri and actually *feel* her. And so Tahiri gave everything she had into her Yuuzhan Vong friend. Calling on her own strength and the power of Zonama Sekot to make things right again.

She had truly become one with the Force, one with the Yuuzhan Vong, balanced between two worlds and able to draw on the strengths of both.

But while she kept one foot lodged in the shadows of her soul, some part of her felt both the remnants of Riina and the old Tahiri stir; as if awakened by the combined usage of their thoughts and feelings. She could feel their individual strengths, the different aspects of their personalities that had survived on into her. But she could also feel both their fears, their rages and hatred. The new Tahiri was able to balance between two worlds only because she was made up of two people who were almost as different as can be. Though they gave her the strength she needed to support and protect Anakin, she had also inherited their own personal demons and darkness. To use their strengths she also had to embrace the negative energies of two different people.

It was almost disconcerting, the feeling of corruption and malice. At one point, it even felt that she was again splitting into two people. Tahiri nearly abandoned her efforts in shock and fear, the thought that

maybe she *wasn't* capable of following in Anakin's footsteps after all crossing her mind.
But she felt Shaeri emit a wheezing breath against her body, and Tahiri temporarily shelved her fears for her close friend. She delved once more back into the powerful emotions that had been fueling the whirlwind of Force energy around her, focusing all her efforts onto Shaeri with renewed determination.
With one last explosive burst of Force energy, the golden aura surrounding the teens flashed out across the planet in a healing jolt of energy. The pulse was powerful, transcending realms and blazing through the dark night. It was augmented by the will of Sekot itself, coursing through the bodies of Ferroan, Jedi, Sekotian life, *and* Yuuzhan Vong alike.
As the golden glow faded away, Tahiri slumped to the ground, and all was silent.
Slowly, the gas giant that was Mobus shifted again, and sunlight reached across the planet of Zonama Sekot once more. The atmosphere was different, happy even. The wildlife, which had fallen silent in recognition of Sekot's distress, was active once more; their caws and cries filling the tampasi in a natural chorus. A flock of birds flew through the air, and several rodent-like creatures curiously peeked their heads out from the nearby underbrush.
The clear sky sparkled in the dazzling sunlight, and all appeared to have returned to normal.
Tahiri stirred, the warm rays heating her slight form. And then the memory of what had happened came crashing back to her.
"Shaeri!"
"I am here, my goddess," Shaeri's soft voice was full of reverence, but also love.
Tahiri glanced at the Yuuzhan Vong teen being held tightly in her arms. The blisters and sores were gone, and there was no sign of distress on the younger teen's face. A look of wonder filled Tahiri's face as her previous tears of frustration turned into tears of joy. "Shaeri."
"You cured me," Shaeri whispered, reaching up to caress Tahiri's face and wipe away a single track of tears. "Just like I knew you would if I held out long enough. You truly are the goddess of all those who were Shamed."
Tahiri emitted a joyous sob, laughing in relief as she held Shaeri against her once more. "Oh Force, Suns, thank you."
Shaeri returned the embrace. "I am alright, Tahiri. As long as you are my goddess, I always will be."

There was the sound of twigs snapping, and both teens looked up to see Anakin leaning against a nearby tree, watching them with a smile on his face. He had been trying to shake his robes free of the dirt that had been kicked up by the burst of Force energy and looked sheepish as they focused on him. "Sorry about that."
"Anakin, she's all better!" Tahiri's voice was drunk with delirious happiness.
"I can see that," Anakin said, reaching out with the Force to share in Tahiri's high spirits. "You sure gave us a scare, Shaeri."
"I will try not to do so in the future," Shaeri blushed.
"The others?" Tahiri quickly looked back to the shapers, as if she had been hoping her curing of Shaeri had somehow brought them back to life.
"Did not make it, unfortunately," a fourth voice said aloud. Ahsi Yim seemed to be sadly looking at the virus-ravaged corpses of herself and the other shapers.
"Sekot?" Anakin guessed.
"Yes," Sekot nodded. "Despite their passing, the memories of Ahsi Yim and the other shapers remain within me. I must thank you, Tahiri Kwaad."
"Thank me?"
"Yes, your treatment of Shaeri was the key for my own battle with the virus. It was proving to be extremely resilient and quick to mutate. But I was able to replicate your combined Force techniques to purify the affected regions of this planet. The outbreak has been successfully halted and eliminated."
"I'm glad," Tahiri said, unwilling to relinquish her grip on the younger teen in her arms. From the contented expression on Shaeri's face, Shaeri had no desire to be anywhere else either. "Even if it was due to the actions of another, I am sorry we brought such a plague to this planet."
"We are not all knowing," Ahsi-Sekot said forgivingly. "And the knowledge I will gain from analyzing this virus will allow me to defend myself against future outbreaks. Unfortunately, there is one thing I cannot repair. The virus was able to affect the neural clusters that control my link to the hyperdrive. Despite my ability to stop the virus, I cannot contain the damage completely. The hyperdrives will activate shortly and I have no way of knowing where we are going or if we will even survive the jump. "
"Thank you for the warning," Tahiri bowed her head. "And again, we're sorry."

Ahsi-Sekot smiled faintly. "If there was ever an introduction back to this galaxy, I think I have just experienced it. I'll go tell the Ferroans and everyone else to get to the shelters. Expect hyperspace jump in an hour at the latest."
Sekot faded away as the sounds of hurried footsteps trampled filled the air.
"Tahiri? Anakin?"
Jacen, Jaina, Nen Yim, Taan, and Danni all emerged from the forest and were drawn up short by the sight. Both Nen Yim and Taan were wearing environmental suits taken from the *Jade Shadow* and were thoroughly stunned when they saw that Shaeri was not only alive, but unscathed from the ravages of a virus that had claimed so many other lives and had left the surrounding clearing devoid of any life.
"Tahiri?" Jaina said slowly.
"I'm alright, Jaina," Tahiri said. "Shaeri is too. And you can remove those helmets, Nen Yim, Taan. Sekot neutralized the virus in this area."
"What…how?" Danni gasped, focusing on Shaeri as the real proof of the virus' absence.
"I was ill, but the Avatar of Yun-Shuno cured me," Shaeri proclaimed. "She is a true Avatar of Yun-Shuno."
Danni blinked wildly and Taan and Nen Yim slowly removed the helmets of their environmental suits. The three looked around the deadened area in complete shock, then focused back on Shaeri, seemingly still unable to believe their eyes.
The happiness of the group was short-lived, however, when Nen Yim spotted the bodies of the other shapers.
"Sister." Nen Yim breathed softly, stiffly walking towards the disease-ravaged forms of the other shapers. The clearing grew quiet once more as Nen Yim slowly knelt by her sister's body. Almost automatically, the Master Shaper removed one of the bulky gloves and reached out to Ahsi's still form.
"I…I arrived too late to save her," Tahiri said in a small voice. "I'm sorry…Nen Yim."
"I am too," Nen Yim said, her voice betraying no emotion. She pulled her hand back and turned from the bodies to glare at Taan. "And you wondered why I called you all weak and foolish dreamers?"
"I accept all blame," Taan dropped the helmet of her environmental suit in distress as Nen Yim stood once more. "The decision to keep Nom Anor alive was my fault. We…no I…I thought he would change. When the surviving members of the Supreme Council meet again, I will step down."

"Coward!" Nen Yim hissed, she sprang forward and gripped the front of Taan's environmental suit with a shaking grasp. The Master Shaper's other hand shook as she pointed towards the dead bodies. "My sister, those shapers, all those foolish idiots who died in the clearing back there. They all followed you because they trusted you, shared that same dream you had. And now, just because things don't go your way, just because something went wrong, you curl up like these infidel *Jeedai* when they feel pain and wait for someone else to take over your dream? You truly are a Shamed One still, weak and cowardly."
"I just got over twenty-five thousand of our people killed!" Taan yelled back.
"And how is your quitting going to help anything?" Nen Yim snapped, slapping Taan across the face. "You owe it to my sister, to all those that died, to make this planet the home they wanted it to be! But if you truly are as weak as I thought you were, go ahead and quit. Prove me right and that the Supreme Council is nothing but a farce. That the Yuuzhan Vong truly cannot do anything without the help of the *Jeedai*. Perhaps we can't even do anything with the *Jeedai* either."
Nen Yim released Taan's environmental suit and shoved the Supreme Leader aside as her voice took on a bitter tone. "We have lost far more people traveling in dark space. We have done things far more terrible than kill off a small handful of people with a weapon we have shaped. *Use* this moment to rally the rest, to give them heart in this war. So a paltry twenty-five thousand died? How many more millions have we lost in this war, have the Free Yuuzhan Vong killed while fighting the zealots that serve Shimrra? You are our leader whether I like it or not, so stand up and act like it!"
"I…"
"Stay silent and think before you speak, Shamed," Nen Yim snarled. The Master Shaper then turned her attention to Shaeri. "Shaeri, even if Tahiri used her…Force…to cure you, you may have developed anti-bodies that are necessary for creating the cure to this virus. If you will consent, will you come with me and the others shapers? We will not always have a super-powered planet on hand should another outbreak occur."
"Of course," Shaeri emerged from Tahiri's arms. As she stood, it was clear that the virus was not the only thing Tahiri had cured. Her legs were whole once more, her fingers no longer bent out of shape, and she was the paragon of a healthy Yuuzhan Vong. "Whatever I can do.
"Danni Quee, I will require your assistance as well."
Danni, who had been looking at Taan with sympathy, nodded. "I'll help. Let me collect a few samples from here. They might come in handy."

"I have instructed the *Cradle of the Shapers* to land a few meters away from the outbreak site. Domain Rin's shapers are already on hand with the progress we've made so far on the counter to the virus. If the gods allow it, we should be able to make a cure for this latest incarnation of evil that should have never been created."
"Nen Yim," Taan whispered. "I…I am…
The Master Shaper stopped in her tracks, not looking back at the younger woman. When she spoke, however, her voice was gentler. "Do not apologize. No words will bring Ahsi back or make this situation better. Show our people that we can rebound from this, that this isn't a divine punishment from the gods, but the acts of a lowly coward and an insane madman. *Be* that leader they believe in. Ahsi has already paid the price for her freedom, for your foolishness. We shall never be allies, Supreme Leader. But we are both Yuuzhan Vong, and right now that matters more than anything."
Without another word, Nen Yim led Shaeri and Danni back towards the site of the future city of Yun-Yuuzhan.
"Taan?" Tahiri said softly.
"She's right," Taan let out a pained breath. "Nen Yim is right. I have a job to do. Tahiri, if you and Jaina would, can you fly me back to the fleet in the *Veila*? I will need to inform the rest of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong of Nom Anor's treachery, and the tragic misjudgment of the Supreme Council and myself. Anakin and Jacen Solo, if you would continue to coordinate with the survivors of this massacre and salvage what you can of our homecoming?"
"Taan, Sekot warned us that the planet would be making a jump to hyperspace soon. Damage caused by the virus," Anakin said.
"Then all the better the reason to return to the fleet. If we lose contact with the rest of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, they will assume that I have died with the others and panic might break out. Tahiri, I regret separating you from Anakin once more but…"
"No it's okay," Tahiri nodded, stepping over to Anakin and squeezing his hands briefly. "I'll have as much time with him as I want when this war is over.
"Jaina Solo?"
"We all have our own duties to perform," Jaina said firmly. "And no offense to Sekot, but I think it's time I rejoined the rest of the galaxy and that pesky intergalactic war."
"Wherever we come out," Jacen said. "We'll then change course to Coruscant."
"Confronting the Overlord head on?" Tahiri's eyebrows rose.
"With Sekot able to counter the virus, we should be fine," Anakin said.

"That wasn't what I meant," Tahiri said dryly.
"I don't know about you, but I've had enough of this war and all the politics involved," Jacen commented. "We'll be able to set the gears in motion, but it will be up to you, Jaya, to make sure the fleets are there to back us up. If anything, this shows that Shimrra is not going away without a fight."
"I'll pass the message on to high command," Jaina said. "Good luck Jace, Little Brother."
"Back at ya, Jaya," Anakin tilted his head.
Jacen clapped his hands together. "Well, we've made it this far."
"Only a short ways to go left," Jaina agreed.
"Isn't it nice how we have the population of two whole galaxies counting on us to end what four years of intergalactic warring couldn't?" Anakin said glibly.
Tahiri rolled her eyes. "That's thinking positive."
"I'm trying at least," Anakin gave her one last kiss. "Stay safe out there?"
"Of course," Tahiri smiled, stepping back.
A Sekotian airship flew over the tampasi to pick the two female Jedi and Taan. "See you boys soon."
Jacen and Anakin waved at them as the trio boarded. "Count on it. After all, like Little Brother said, we have a war to end."

0-[II]-0 0-[II]-0

Natua was still slightly stunned that Ganner's insane plan had gone off without a hitch.
It all began when the puppet government allowed the two of them to privately meet with the freighter crews that were to transport the slaves to Coruscant. During the individual meetings, the crews of said freighters were 'persuaded' to change course to Mon Cal, turn themselves in...and admit to all the crimes they had participated in. Ship by ship, the two cajoled, Falleen pheromone-ed, and threatened every single crew member. And when that didn't work, which did happen on occasion, they used the Force to get their points across.
The next day, she and Ganner had front-row seats with the rest of the Corulag government, watching as the slaving fleet went on their merry way to deliver 100,000-plus slaves and prisoners straight back to the bastion of free civilization.
And to think the history books would attribute this all to the mid-flight changes in heart of the freighter crews.
"Very good," Ganner, in his guise as Peace Brigade Director Zekk Wan Tu (the Third), said. "The Supreme Overlord will be most pleased."

The governing council of Corulag looked grateful as they walked along the roof of the starport. "Thank you Director Tu, it has been an honor to serve him."
Natua tried to keep her expression expressionless. To think Ganner still had even more ideas up his sleeve. Some of them seemed so grandiose, they appeared to be completely ridiculous and impossible to achieve. Yet if someone had told her four days ago that she'd be freeing over a hundred thousand slaves and prisoners without a shot fired or a bribe paid, she'd think them crazy. She had once asked Ganner what would happen if they were found out, and he simply shrugged and responded.
"Why waste time thinking of the negative stuff? That's what Zekk is for. If that time comes, just go with what happens and trust our friends to get us out of that hole we dug ourselves."
As if her reflection had just cursed them, a hurried aide rushed up to the council leader and whispered a message. The council all glanced back to Ganner and Natua, then quickly glanced away again.
"Uh oh," Ganner whispered in a low voice.
"Uh oh?"
"Ten credits our cover's been blown."
"Not taking that bet," Natua muttered, tensing as she did.
"Guards!" The council leader called out, snapping his fingers as if that would summon them faster.
Quicker than Natua would have thought possible, the rooftop was suddenly flooded with blaster rifle-toting guards.
The council leader turned and glared at Ganner and Natua. "You dare make a mockery out of us!?"
"It wasn't all that hard, really," Ganner said with a smile.
"We'll see if you're still laughing when we deliver you to Commander Shen'g. Hand over your lightsabers and no one has to get hurt. Commander Shen'g has already been informed that we have two Jedi in custody and is on his way down as we speak."
"Alright," Ganner shrugged, unclipping his saber and setting it down. "Now do you want me to hand over just my saber, or the two blasters and vibroblades I have with me too?"
The council leader's face purpled. "All your weapons!"
Ganner made a face. "I was only asking."
Natua followed his lead, allowing her skin tone to return to its neutral green state. "I have a question, if I may."
The council leader swallowed, but affected by her Falleen pheromones, he nodded. "Go ahead Jedi, but be quick about it."

"Will not Commander Shen'g just kill all of you for failing to detect us when we first approached you? We *were* right under your noses for four whole days and none of you noticed anything. Even if you do turn us over, he'll still be the one taking credit for capturing us."
The council glanced back and forth at each other uncertainly.
"She's right, you know," Ganner added helpfully, sitting nonchalantly in front of his pile of discarded weapons.
"Blast it!" The council leader swore. "Take them to the lower holding cells and inform Commander Shen'g he can visit them there."
"Yes sir."
The guards motioned to Ganner and Natua, and both Jedi allowed themselves to be escorted down a flight of stairs. The council, in the meantime, took the turbolift back down to the ground level.
"What now?" Natua whispered to Ganner.
"Now we let Zekk and the others do whatever they're going to do. Remember what I said, trust our friends. They're bound to have something fun and exciting in mind."
"You are a very weird Jedi, Jedi Knight Rhysode," Natua said with a fond smile. They left the stairwell and began to walk through an empty food court.
"That's me. Now stop your worrying, nothing ever gets accomplished by burning a hole in your stomach. Well, except indigestion."
"Silence!"
Ganner glanced at the guard. "Still not too late for a career change."
"I said silence!"
"Fine."
Suddenly they heard a distant explosion from somewhere in the front of the spaceport.
"What was that?" The guard said in alarm.
Another group of armed men and women came swarming out of everywhere—diving around food booths, emerging from doors, dropping down from upper levels, everywhere. This new group promptly raised their blasters at Natua and Ganner's captors.
"Surrender traitors!" A man in civilian clothing barked.
There was a pause as Natua and Ganner's captors stared blankly at the new arrivals.
"Career change?" Ganner offered with a disarming smile, holding out his hands to his captors.
They all eagerly and quickly handed over their weapons.
"See, Green Girl, told you Zekk would come through," Ganner handed the weapons off to the second armed group, while others attached binders to the newly surrendered guards.

"You can stop now, Jedi Knight Rhysode. After freeing all those slaves, this kind of pales in comparison. I'm not impressed."
"Oh," Ganner mock pouted. "Fine. I'll have to go think of something else then."
"You can top the freeing of a hundred thousand slaves?"
"Green Girl, of course I can. I'm Ganner Rhysode."
0-[III]-0 0-[III]-0
"That's just great," Zekk muttered, staring through a pair of electrobinoculars. The Corulag puppet government had a whole host of lackeys guarding themselves. "There's now an army of thugs and soldiers between us and those two."
Both Mallie and Rahm let out small laughs, causing Zekk to look over his shoulder at them.
"Am I missing something?"
"Father's taken out worse," Rahm said opaquely.
The elder Marek shook his head. "I'm getting too old for that."
"Come on, father," Mallie said. "At least do that thing you do with those power generator droids." She pointed to where several of the bipedal, boxy-looking droids were gathered nearby. "Rahm, Zekk and I can do the rest."
Galen eyed his children. "You know that after the last time, I've begun to feel guilty about doing that."
"Please, for us?" Rahm said.
Rahm's father sighed, caving at the expectant and hopeful looks on his children's faces. "Get in position then, and don't tell your mom."
Zekk, Rahm, and Mallie crept closer to the formation of mercenaries and thugs surrounding the spaceport.
"Mallie?" Zekk whispered. "What's this thing he does with the power droids?"
"Turns them into fireworks."
Before Zekk could ask what she was referring to, he felt a powerful tremor within the Force. It was wild, almost uncontrollable, and there was a definite flavor of darkness in it. He looked up behind him and saw a handful of the box-like droids swirling about high in the air with Galen below, eyes closed in concentration. The older Jedi seemed to fool around a little bit, dangling the droids left and right as he lined them up with the corrupt guards and thugs guarding the Corulag ruling council.
"What…?"
Unexpected for Zekk, Galen suddenly let out a surge of purple lightning that consumed each of the power droids. The crackling droids

were then launched like square, electrified, cannon balls, into the formations of guards.
With explosive results.
People were sent flying and others quickly scrambled for cover. The council was ushered into a speeder which promptly shot away, while the rest of their bodyguard stayed behind and tried to recover from the sudden attack.
Both of Galen's children leaped out of their cover, a molten yellow blade emerging from Mallie's saber and an unstable blue blade crackling from Rahm's.
The thugs and guards seemed completely caught off guard by the appearance of two teens, especially after the bombardment of exploding droids, and that pause cost them the advantage.
Mallie held out a hand and lifted two of the bulkier guards in a manner similar to what her father had done with the droids. As they yelped and cried out in panic, with a sideways jerk of her hand, Mallie used the two as a broom and proceeded to sweep aside a whole line of guards into one giant, groaning pile of bodies. Several more guards opened fire on her, but she absorbed the energy from the shots and repeated the sweeping process with another hand gesture, creating a second pile of groaning bodies right by the first.
Rahm, in the meantime, had his blade in a reverse grip as he sprinted towards a line of thugs. The blue blade crackled and hissed at it reflected the volley of blaster bolts back at the shooters in a flurry of motion. Rahm leaped up into the air, twisting as he did. His Force-assisted landing created a small crater, and he used the same energy to lift up those in his immediate vicinity the moment his feet touched the ground. With another blast of Force energy, those in the air went pin-wheeling away with startled cries.
"Still messy as ever, Rahm!" Mallie called out, pushing together a third pile.
"I get the job done!" Rahm lifted up a Gamorean with the Force, and then hammered the green mercenary with another burst of Force energy. It was like a bat hitting a ball, and the Gamorean let out a squeal, its fat limbs flaying as it careened through the air and into one of Mallie's nicely manicured piles.
The sight of a flying pig finally managed to shake Zekk from his shock, and he made to join the battle. The moment he stood, however, the ground trembled under the heavy mechanical footsteps of an AT-ST. The towering walker emerged from a nearby hangar with even more guards in support. Corlag rebels from all over opened fire, and a heated blaster fight broke out.

At first the rebels seemed out-gunned in the face of the heavy firepower from the scout walker, but the equation was soon balanced out. Zekk felt a shadow pass by over him and looked up in time to see Galen finish his leap and land directly in front of the AT-ST.
"What's he doing?" Zekk yelled in alarm to the nearby Rahm.
In the middle of blocking a flurry of blaster bolts, Rahm shouted back. "Relax, he's faced worse!"
The walker tried to crush Galen with a heavy metal foot, but the unorthodox Jedi proved to be much more agile. Galen leaped up to the top of the walker to avoid the stomping feet, and kicked off against the boxy head with a Force-assisted push. He landed back on the ground, and as the walker regained balance, Galen darted in once more. This time a vibrant blue lightsaber flared to life as he leaped upwards in a blur of motion. The lightsaber appeared to cleave the walker cleanly in two. A fact confirmed when Galen hit the walker with another blast of Force energy while in mid-air, sending both halves of the walker falling away from each other and the pilots flailing on their way down.
Zekk's jaw dropped open at how easily and effortlessly the older Jedi had dispatched the walker. And he wasn't the only one. Almost all of the guards, and some of the rebels, were staring at Galen as if he had performed some type of miracle. Galen simply deactivated his lightsaber and walked back out of the fight.
"The rest is yours, Rahm, Mallie."
"That's father for you," Rahm laughed, shaking his head in amusement at Zekk's gob smacked expression.
With the walker so easily dispatched, the rest of the guards quickly gave up, throwing their weapons to the ground almost fearfully. The Corulag rebels cautiously moved out of their cover and began placing binders on the subdued guards with the help of Galen's children.
With the battle over, Zekk followed Galen back to their escape speeder.
"That was quick," Zekk commented.
"I've had plenty of practice," Galen shrugged.
"Cutting apart scout walkers?" Zekk said incredulously.
Galen took a deep breath. "Yup, it was a long time ago though. In any case, Corulag's government has a three point five minutes response time for emergencies. We don't have much longer."
"That's okay, here comes Ganner and Natua now," Zekk pointed to the entrance of the spaceport, where the other two Jedi were leading a group of security forces with their hands on top of their heads in surrender.

"Seducer of Hapans!" Ganner called out amiably. "I told Natua you had a plan up your sleeve."
"Director Zekk," Zekk greeted frostily.
"You're not angry about that, are you?" Ganner blinked. "It was the first name I could think of that wasn't famous."
"Thanks."
"Errr…I didn't mean…"
"I know what you meant," Zekk said archly, before smiling and shaking his head. "Only you Ganner."
Ganner shrugged sheepishly. "In any case, we need to get out of here, right now."
"We still have a minute left before Corulag's reinforcements get here."
"No, the big boys called the guys in orbit who have those glowy plasma weapons."
"Oh," Zekk looked to Galen, who whistled sharply at the other rebels. Quick as a flash, everyone began to evacuate the area, prisoners in tow.
"You Corulagi *have* to teach me how to just suddenly appear and disappear like that," Ganner muttered.
"We'll have several months before *our* reinforcements get here," Galen said dryly as they piled into a speeder. "You'll have plenty of time to learn then."
In the distance, Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers were already swooping through the sky.
"Several months," Natua commented mildly. "Several months of running around in the sewers and causing all sorts of trouble for this planet's not so beloved government."
"I'm going to miss that all-you-can-eat buffet and the silken sheets," Ganner bemoaned.
"Don't worry, your little stunt as Director of the Peace Brigade gave the rebels something they had been losing," Galen said.
"Oh?"
"Hope," Galen answered, focusing on driving the speeder. "You'll probably be treated as royalty for the next couple of days for what the two of you did. Many of those in the rebellion had family or friends on those freighters you sent off."
"Royalty. That's not that bad."
Galen glanced fondly at Ganner through the speeder's rearview mirror. "I think Corulag's going to enjoy having you over, Jedi Knight Rhysode."
"Please, it's just Ganner," Ganner stretched out his arms on the back seat. "And I don't try to be a hero, or give hope to others, it just happens."

"Strangely enough," Galen remarked with a knowing tilt of his head. "I know *exactly* what you mean."

0-[IV]-0 0-[IV]-0

The *Century Hawk* glided back down through the clouds above Coronet as a new day dawned. Escorting the aged Corellian freighter was an honor guard of CorSec fighters and Galactic Alliance X-wings and E-wings. The Bakuran-class destroyer, the *Sentinel,* coasted down alongside the YT-1300 freighter, much to the jubilation and cheers of the crowds below.

"Momentous music anyone?" Danielle called out, flicking on the ship's HoloNet. She changed a few channels before an uplifting, rousing score filled the ship.

Kirney and Lowbacca looked at the Corellian in disbelief. "Really?" Kirney said.

"What? We just took out our own government and then chased away a hoard of angry invaders bent on genocide. We deserve to hear something other than blaster fire and explosions."

Kirney looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged. "Why not? Go ahead and put it through the external speakers, set the mood for everyone else outside."

"Got it, boss."

The two larger ships coasted to an uneventful landing. As the engines cooled down, Tarc and Jysella entered the cockpit.

"How are our passengers?" Danielle chirped.

"Grumpy," Jysella answered.

"Can we just take the million-credit bribe and turn them over to the authorities anyways?" Tarc asked hopefully. "Well, fifteen million if I add up all the bribes."

"Tarc," Kirney raised an eyebrow.

"It was just a thought," Tarc said.

"The money belongs to the people of Corellia. With the Diktat and his cronies in prison, all their funds will be given back to the planet," Kirney lectured.

"Even these credits?" Tarc held up a handful of credit chits. "They were carrying a lot on them."

"Yes Tarc, even those credits," Kirney rolled her eyes. "Despite our penchant for coups, we are *still* the good guys you know."

"Good and poor," Danielle looked at the handful of credits longingly. "For some reason, only the bad guys end up with tons of credits. Bad guys and those crazy adventurers who sell all the gear they strip from the bodies of the people they kill. You know what? We should consider

a career change. Us shuttle pilots are doomed to a life of near poverty."
"Says the woman with her own freighter," Kirney sighed, shaking her head. "Anyways, Tarc, we're returning those credits back to the people of Corellia. Unless, of course, you want your new Jedi friend to make frowny faces at you?"
Tarc glanced at Jysella, who was trying but failing to hold her stern expression. "Yes, serve the light side you must. To temptation, you mustn't give in."
Tarc tilted his head in confusion.
"Oh, the Master Yoda speak is only a Jedi thing, huh?"
"Probably," Tarc agreed. "But don't worry, the credits will go back to Corellia."
"Wasn't worried, I knew you weren't the sort of person to keep them," Jysella patted Tarc's arm.
"Can't say I wasn't tempted."
"For fifteen million credits, I doubt many people wouldn't be," Jysella laughed. "Come on, lets get those scum off this ship. Lowie, you want to give us a hand?"
Lowbacca rowled in amusement and vacated the co-pilot's seat. Before he left the cockpit, Danielle held out a hand. "You wouldn't consider staying on as one of my crew, big guy? I could use a good Wookie co-pilot."
Lowbacca glanced about the cockpit, but then slowly shook his head. "[I have my uncle's life debt to fulfill to another.]"
"Worth a shot," Danielle grinned as they walked back into the main lounge.
Their disgruntled passengers were bound and gagged, and glaring death at their captors.
"You will all stand up and march yourselves out of this ship without any problem," Jysella droned, sounding almost bored as she injected the Force into her words.
"[Why'd you want my help?]" Lowbacca asked when the Corellians did as told.
"The Diktat is able to resist Force commands," Jysella poked at the wiry man. "He's currently pretending that what I just did worked."
Lowbacca calmly strode up to the Diktat and glared at the man. Once again, the man's knees shook. Lowbacca let out a low growl, and the man's eyes rolled back as he passed out again. The other politicians, their eyes still glazed from Jysella's command, didn't even bat an eyelash. The Wookie Jedi Knight hefted the Diktat under one arm, like a

sack of grain. He then looked at Jysella, bobbing his head in amusement.
"Thought you'd have fun out of that, Lowie," Jysella said fondly. "Come on. I don't think Tarc's crazy aunt wants these guys on her ship for a moment longer than they have to be."
"Good instincts, Jedi," Danielle gave a mock salute. "Now let's go be heroes."
The crew of the *Century Hawk* emerged to the deafening cheers of rows and rows of citizens and CorSec officers. Several X-wings whizzed by overhead, releasing fireworks in their wake. Armored tanks formed an honor guard, as Yuuzhan Vong who had surrendered were being escorted into the *Sentinel* by Yaqeel and the Wild Knights. The celebratory din was enough to wake Thrackan, who promptly wiggled out of Lowbacca's grip and tried to recover whatever dignity he had left.
The other prisoners the crew of the *Century Hawk* had captured all tried to keep their heads high as they were jeered by everyone they passed. If Jysella had been capable, she would have used telekinesis to stop several of the crowd from throwing rotting vegetables at their former leaders.
Or maybe not. She was a Jedi, but she was still an apprentice after all.
In the end, though, several squads of CorSec officers marched down to greet the freighter's crew and take the prisoners into custody. The crew continued on up a flight of steps to greet the more friendly politicians.
"Senator Drawad," Kirney gestured to their charges behind them. "I turn these less than upstanding citizens over to you."
"Let's hope they learn from their actions, in prison," Jysella added, glaring at the Diktat.
"This isn't over, girl," Thrackan snarled at her as several CorSec officers began to lead him away. "I'll be back one day, you'll see! Mark my words, I'll be back!"
"How did he get elected to Diktat again?" Tarc scratched his head.
The Corellian senator Chelch Drawad gestured regretfully. He had always been an ally to the Jedi and was one of the few senators who had supported them from the outset of the war. "He had friends in all the right places. Fortunately, most of those friends are being led away with him. The others perished when the rightful sons and daughters of Corellia retook their planet. And none of it would have been possible if it weren't for you."
"Not us," Kirney waved away his praised. "Give the credit here to Jedi Apprentice Jysella Horn. She was the brains behind everything.

DonoSlane Excursions is simply a tour company that provides charters to whoever needs one."
Jysella turned crimson as the senator inclined his head towards her. "Again it appears we have the Jedi to thank for turning back the Yuuzhan Vong. Thanks to your entire family, Corellia is free once more."
The twelve year old apprentice felt the rest of her family approach and she grinned sheepishly. "We're all Corellian, senator. It'd be wrong if we didn't come to the aid of our homeworld."
Senator Drawad smiled beatifically. "If only all Corellians thought as you do. Look, I know that there is a galactic-sized war going on, but Corellia would really benefit if you, your brother, or father stayed behind to help get us to where we need to be. Corellia is steadfast behind the Galactic Alliance at the moment, but as you can tell from the smoking craters and ruined ships, we took quite a beating. Whoever stays can think of themselves as the Galactic Alliance's official Jedi representative. A show of good faith."
Jysella checked back at her father and Valin, uncertain. "Senator, Jedi do not serve the Galactic Alliance, only the Force."
"I understand, but our people need guidance, strong leaders, someone to believe in after the disastrous years under the Diktat and his corrupt inner circle."
"Dad?" Jysella said hesitantly. "You're the ranking Jedi here."
"I think it will be good for both you and your brother," Corran said after a moment of thought. "You can help Corellia grow strong and still participate in the war effort."
"This isn't an attempt to get us away from the frontlines, is it?" Valin asked.
Corran inclined his head. "In part. But think of it this way. For the next few months, or at least until the Galactic Alliance can restart its offensive, Corellia will be a *part* of those frontlines. You and Sella will have the important job of helping CorSec coordinate with the Galactic Alliance to hold this sliver of space. Remember, if the impressions we're getting from the other Jedi are true, this is the only beachhead the Galactic Alliance has inside the Inner Rim. A nice a relaxing vacation, this *won't* be."
Both Horn children straightened at the seriousness in their father's voice. "We won't let you down, dad."
Corran sent out a small wave of affection to the two of them. "More importantly, don't let yourselves down. I expect the two of you to look after each other, right?"
"Of course," they nodded obediently.

"Well then, Senator Drawad, they're all yours. Take care of them."
"I'll do my best, Corran." The senator nodded. "And for one last bit of diplomatic magic. Can the representatives of the tour company DonoSlane Excursions approach?"
As one, the small group, a very odd mix of individuals, stepped back up.
"As a reward for your part in transporting the Jedi around in the face of great danger, I've talked it over with my colleagues and they're willing to give you the former diktat's personal hangar at the Behareh Spaceport. Maybe this way you'll be able to attract more business and can have room to expand your operations."
"Thank you, Senator," Kirney bowed her head.
"Despite what you may think, you and your employees are definitely heroes," Senator Drawad said. "Just try not to help with anymore coups in the future."
"We'll definitely work on that," Kirney smirked.
"Then that's that," Senator Drawad looked out at the gathered throng of tens of thousands and held out his hand. "My fellow Corellians, the battle may have been won today, but we still have a ways to go until this war is over. We are going to fight, we are going to scheme, we are going to push those Yuuzhan Vong all the way out of the galaxy again if we have to. Wherever they run, wherever they hide, we will burn their fleets and crush their soldiers. Never again will they be allowed to harm anyone else! Before this war is over, this galaxy is going to once again learn the meaning of Corellian, learn the strength of our resolve, and the richness of our culture. We'll rebuild our fleets and stretch out our arms across the stars; become a legitimate powerhouse that won't yield to anyone. We'll be marching Corellia into a new era, one where it stands side by side with the Galactic Alliance as partners and equals, making this galaxy a better place. Are you with me?"
As the crowd roared in approval, both Jysella and Valin exchanged dubious expressions about this new era Senator Drawad seemed to have in mind. It wasn't the whole 'as equals' part that had them unnerved, but it was more the jingoist nature Corellia seemed to have developed overnight. It was as if their fight for independence had sparked an unintended consequence. Corellia had always had an independent streak, a strong sense of cultural pride, but this was something else altogether. A supportive Corellia was good, but a Corellia embracing Bothan-like ideas of an all-out war and establishing themselves as a powerhouse based on that war wasn't the most positive.
"Sella?"

"Yeah?"
"Think we have our work cut out for us?"
"Most definitely," Jysella answered, watching Tarc hold his head in his hands and shake in disbelief. As the senator went on about Corellian pride and bowing down to no one, Tarc gave her an ever-suffering look, causing her to giggle slightly and nod in understanding. Both Myn and Kirney patted Tarc sympathetically, sharing their own knowing smiles with Jysella. She got a feeling in the Force that whatever the future held, the odd family that made up the staff of DonoSlane Excursions would definitely be playing some role in it.
"It's going to be hard, if not impossible to get these people to tone down their zealousness and hatred for the Yuuzhan Vong. Add to the fact is the difficulty of getting them to listen to any of our words of moderation. We're only kids to them, for Force sake. I tell you, Sella, I'm not really liking these odds."
"Val, we're Jedi *and* Corellian," Jysella smiled uneasily as the crowd roared in support of Senator Drawad once more. "Never tell me the odds."
0-[V]-0 0-[V]-0
The scene within the War Room on Mon Calamari was a bit less panicked than it had been the previous time. Within the span of a week and a half, the balance of the war had tilted in the favor of the Galactic Alliance, back into the favor of the Yuuzhan Vong, and then evened out once more. Four days had passed since word reached Mon Calamari of the successes and losses incurred by the Galactic Alliance's counter to the Yuuzhan Vong counter-offensive.
In that time, the knowledge that several Jedi were trapped behind enemy lines came from an unexpected source; a convoy of transports full of slaves that had dropped out of hyperspace. Despite the desire for Tenel Ka and the others to save the trapped Jedi, their own advance was halted in the wake of the losses suffered by the Galactic Alliance. The Senate and High Council simply wasn't willing to risk any more lives to save a few Jedi who might or might not be dead by the time help made it to them. The members of the Senate had become a lot less eager for conflict given the near disaster that had befallen the Galactic Alliance fleets, but their panic had been replaced with anger and impatience.
The reports coming in via Freed Yuuzhan Vong villip or couriers, painted a grim picture of the war. Admiral Kre'fey's death and the loss of so many ships were one thing, but the knowledge that the Yuuzhan Vong had nearly turned Corellia into another Bastion had chilled everyone to the bone. They all knew they were lucky that things had

turned out as they had. That they were fortunate that at *some* gains had been made.
After the massive victories at Obroa-Skai, Ebaq 9, Hutt Space, and elsewhere, it had been easy to forget that the Yuuzhan Vong under Shimrra were truly a force to be reckoned with.
There was a reason why the war was dragging on into its fourth year, a reason why Shimrra held Coruscant, decimated Bastion, and became the downfall of the New Republic. Even with a Warmaster as reckless as Tsavong Lah had been, the Yuuzhan Vong had crushed all resistance in their path. The victories won by the Galactic Alliance had been important, yes, and the defection of the Yuuzhan Vong into the Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement were many. But Shimrra still had countless millions of Yuuzhan Vong under his command, hundreds of ships grown and ready to do battle. He now had a much more competent Warmaster in Nas Choka, whose counter-offensive already proved that he was a step above the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong commanders. And if Kre'fey and the failed attack on Fondor was anything to go by, it appeared as if the war was far from over.
"Just when we take several step forwards, we have to take several giant leaps backwards," Senator Chau Feswin of the Galactic Alliance Defense Council, said in despair. "How long is this war going to drag out? At the rate we're going, it's certainly not weeks. How about months? Dare I say it, years? Even if we do win, will there be anything left of this galaxy to salvage when this war is out? We've accomplished nothing, nothing!"
"I wouldn't say everything is lost just yet," life-long politician, Chair of the Outer Rim Relief Efforts, and senator of the Sujimis sector, Riyo Chuchi said soothingly. "We have retaken Bilbringi and have a secure hold on Corellia. Most of the Outer Rim is now safe in our hands. What's more, this galaxy is more united than ever. That is a bit more than nothing, wouldn't you agree?"
Rodian senator of the Savareen Sector, Moog Ulur, scoffed. "I disagree. We've been at war for four years and there is *still* no end in sight despite our best efforts. We continue to lose soldiers and ships on foolish campaigns orchestrated by the Jedi and their politician dogs. At the start of this war, we abandoned the Mid Rim to defend the Core, and where did that get us? We lost the Core *and* countless Mid Rim worlds! Worlds that could have been saved if it weren't for the poor tactics supported by the Jedi. Even now, as we shift to the Galactic Alliance, we make an attempt to retake Coruscant, a dead planet! We've all seen the Intel reports. What good will Coruscant be to us in the long run when there are countless worlds suffering and in need of

our help? Worlds that actually have *strategic* value to this war. It was a mistake to leave our military efforts in the hands of the High Council. They can no more wage war than a not-even-weaned pup can survive without its mother."
"Military aside, economically, we cannot afford to keep up this current pace," Chairman of the Commerce Council, senator Cola Quis voiced. "Sure we may have temporarily added to our coffers by winning over the Hutts and the Imperials, but that boost is being rapidly drained. Every resource that goes into our ship building yards, every credit that goes into training a pilot or a soldier, is credits that are draining our member systems of their livelihood. Senator Feswin is right, if we don't end the war soon, there won't be a point in doing so. Multiple systems in our care have dropped into massive debt which will take them decades to recover from. Poverty is widespread throughout most systems under our control, and on some developed planets, who have entire cities that are starving. With every ship we lose and replace, the resources and credits used could have supported a thousand refugees or citizens."
"With the added negative campaign against Anakin Solo and the Jedi of the High Council, the public is also beginning to lose patience," Pal'iva Konat said, looking to both the senators and the other members of the High Council across the wide, round table. "When we declared a new government, pronounced ourselves the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances, the public expected a new era, an end to the war. Not more of the same. I'm doing what I can to keep the media outlets on our side, but with the Yuuzhan Vong in firm control of everything from the Inner Rim to the Core, and their fleets freely marauding about the Colonies and Mid Rim, there is only so much I can do. The public wants results now, not in months' or years' time."
Cal Omas rubbed at his forehead. "I understand what all of you are saying, my friends. At this point in time, the setbacks do seem to outweigh the gains. That's why I called this meeting, including both members of the Senate and as much of the High Council as could attend. And I thank those attending via holocomm, I promise this will not take much of your time."
With a clear corridor from Corellia, through Hutt Space and past Hapes in allied control, a new set of HoloNet buoys had been deployed. This allowed for Corran, Saba, and Kyp to join Tresina, Kenth, and Cilghal as holograms. Other Senators were also broadcasting from their homeworlds, their blue figures flickering in the chairs they 'occupied.' Cal Omas hit a button on the middle of the table and the swirling image of Mon Calamari appeared. A second button, and multiple

hyperspace routes from Mon Calamari to Coruscant were added.
"Director Ayddar Nylykerka, if you please."
The Director of Galactic Alliance Fleet Intelligence nodded and stood. "We know for a fact that the Yuuzhan Vong cannot maintain this war indefinitely either. They entered this galaxy with a finite amount of resources, and even given their new shipyards in the Core, they still need people to crew those ships. The Supreme Overlord knows this as well as we, and this and another factor will greatly affect the coming months of this war. Supreme Commander Sovv?"
The Sullestian rose to his feet as Ayddar sat. "Our forces, including those of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, are currently engaged in ground battles with Shimrra's people across sixty-five systems. Our fleets, which have taken heavy casualties in recent days, are similarly engaged. As our esteemed colleagues from the Senate have pointed out, at this rate, the war is unwinnable. For *either* side. It would take years for either side to take this galaxy system by system. As numerous and as savvy as the Yuuzhan Vong are, they are only one people and do not have the resources to survive a prolonged war with an entire galaxy. And despite the number of shipyards and resources *we* have at our disposal, the Yuuzhan Vong have become too entrenched. We would destroy ourselves destroying them."
"And that is where the second factor comes in," Ayddar announced. "We have recently received word from Jedi Knight Jaina Solo that Zonama Sekot has indeed been found and agreed to help. Now we are equally certain that Shimrra knows this as well. If Zonama Sekot appears above Coruscant, his entire powerbase and all of his legitimacy will go up in smoke. He will not stay in power for long if Zonama Sekot disproves his claim that Coruscant is their rightful homeworld. He knows this and will want to squash all opposition before that happens."
"So we are attacking Coruscant again?" One of the Mid Rim senators scowled.
"Not like you would think," Grand Admiral Pellaeon said calmly. "We know that the re-emergence of Zonama Sekot will force Shimrra to act, to resort to desperation to end this war. Like us, he will believe that destroying the enemy capital will be all that is needed. He will send his ships here, to Dac."
"Then we'll be recalling our own fleets to defend this planet?" Senator Chaus Feswin said, panic in his voice.
"Only some," Pellaeon replied. "We're going to let the Yuuzhan Vong come. In fact, we'll even bait them. Shimrra's going to be sending everything he has at us to crush us with overwhelming force."

"Some?" Fyor Rodan blurted incredulity. "If we're going to be facing the full wrath of the Yuuzhan Vong, we should have *all* of our ships at our disposal. Do you *want* another 'Coruscant' on your heads?"
"I guess that's our cue to enter."
The gathered group turned as Taan, flanked by Jaina and Tahiri, entered the room.
"Sirs," Jaina saluted crisply to Sien Sovv and Pellaeon.
"Colonel," Sien Sovv replied. "At ease."
"Senators, Masters, soldiers, other important people," Tahiri tilted her head in glib greeting.
"Tahiri," Corran's hologram flickered as the man smiled in amusement. *"Good to see you again. You got back quickly."*
"Good to see you too. The *Veila* can go really fast, might even give the *Falcon* a run for its credits," Tahiri grinned.
"*Don't let Han hear you say that."*
Tahiri looked to the others and then gestured to Taan. "May I present Supreme Leader Taan, of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, she's here to tell you the end game to this war."
A vast majority of the gathered senators shifted uncomfortably in the presence of the Yuuzhan Vong leader. They had every right to be unnerved, and both Tahiri and Jaina broadcasted calming waves of energy to keep any of the more high-strung senators or guards from doing something rash.
"Thank you," Taan said in flawless Basic. "As Jedi Knight Kwaad has said, I am here to help you end the war."
"We cede the briefing to you, Supreme Leader." Ayddar and Sien Sovv sat down.
Taan folded her hands in front of her as she made eye contact with each and every person in the room. "We are all in agreement that this war needs to end. And before the year is out, it will. At this moment, the Freed Yuuzhan Vong has close to two thousand operatives on the planet you call Coruscant. These operatives are everything from cell leaders to infiltrators in Shimrra's citadel. That number may not sound like much, but these cell leaders and infiltrators all have built their own private armies out of the Shamed and disillusioned on Coruscant. In total, the Freed Yuuzhan Vong and your intelligence teams already have a force in place of upwards of thirty-thousand soldiers ready to bring about the downfall of Shimrra should the signal be given. And this is only counting the people we have confirmed to be ready to revolt. There may be countless others once Zonama Sekot appears. Coruscant is already ours, Shimrra does not know it yet."

"And we'll be reinforcing Taan's people with Zonama Sekot itself," Jaina explained. "The planet is willing to be the homeworld all the Yuuzhan Vong have been searching for. Taking away their reason to fight, their reason to die, we'll have essentially defeated a vast majority of the Yuuzhan Vong forces. They're living beings just like you and me, and even they are tired of the constant warfare."
"And that leaves everything to the rest of you important people," Tahiri concluded. "Once Zonama Sekot appears, Shimrra's going to be recalling every single Yuuzhan Vong who will listen to him. Until Shimrra is defeated, we're going to need all of your help in holding off Shimrra's reinforcements."
"You'll have it," Sien Sovv said, as Pellaeon nodded in agreement. "It'll take some time to move our ships into position, but when the time comes, we'll be ready."
"And what of Dac?" Senator Feswin said. "We're going to leave this planet undefended?"
"We're going to hold out for as long as we can," Sien Sovv corrected. "It will still take the Yuuzhan Vong at least a month's time to travel to Mon Calamari from Coruscant, even after they regroup to launch such an attack. By then, Zonama Sekot will be in position, as will our forces. The Yuuzhan Vong will attack here, we'll attack Shimrra, and Shimrra will recall his people ending the attack on Mon Calamari."
"So what you are saying is that in as early as two months' time, one way or another, this war will be over?" The hologram for the senator from the Japrael sector, Lux Bonteri, asked for clarification.
"Of course more planning is need, but in short, yes," Sien Sovv nodded to the silent audience. "In two months' time, this war will be over."
0-[Chapter End]-0
A\N: We're back and on the homestretch! A bit of a lighter chapter this time around to counter all the grimness of the past few.
I really, really, really tried to kill Shaeri off, really! It was one of only two planned deaths I had since the start of the story. I had multiple ideas of how it would happen (A death duel with Nom Anor was one idea, where they both inflict fatal wounds on one and other as she stops him from using the virus. Sacrificing herself to protect Tahiri from an assassination attempt was yet another. In a similar vein I also had a plot thought out where she makes it all the way into the final battle and is killed by Shimrra), yet when I wrote the scene, Shaeri ended up making it. Oh well, I guess goes to show that even I don't know what's going to happen in my own stories!
Double-Update Wednesday will feature the Interlude and the start of the Unifying Force. I kind of scrapped the whole 'Han and Leia goes to

Vong planet on very poor tactical decision due to prison-camp escapee info and sees virus killing everything,' canon storyline for something a bit more action packed.
On a completely unrelated note, SWTOR (now free to play!) is such a time drainer! For the first time in a long while, I've gone seven whole days without writing a single word of this story's sequels in my free time because I've been running around on Tython, Nar Shadda, Coruscant, and various other planets. I blame any typos left in this chapter to that accursed game =).

ADA 60 Final Interlude

Sixty
}-I-{ }-I-{
"*Twin Suns Two, standing by. All Twin Suns ready for combat. It's great to have you back, ma'am"*
"It's great to be back, Vale," Jaina smiled. There was no other place she felt more at home than in the cockpit of her X-wing. Zonama Sekot had been nice, just a bit too tame for her tastes. "Thanks for taking care of the squad for Lowie and me."
"Twin Suns Leader, this is Barefoot Leader, all fighters checked in and ready to go," Tahiri announced.
"I copy. All fighters switch S-foils into attack position. *Rebel Dream* we are awaiting your go."
"*General Antilles to all participating craft, permission to begin Operation New Dawn, granted. Good luck."*
In the run up to what everyone knew was going to be the final battle, Galactic Alliance and Freed Yuuzhan Vong Intelligence had pinpointed Shimrra's slave labor and prison camps spread throughout the galaxy. The goal was to liberate as many of the slaves and prisoners as possible to avoid any repercussions should the local camp commanders decide to be very bad losers once Coruscant was retaken. Twin Suns and Barefoot squadrons were just two of the many fighter squadrons participating in a galaxy-wide jailbreak; a quick in-and-out job coordinated with Freed Yuuzhan Vong agents.
The fighters roared out from behind the moon of their current target, a prison camp on the backwater planet of Selvaris. Though in the Inner Rim—prime Shimrra Yuuzhan Vong territory—the strikeforce was being reinforced by ships out of the recently re-captured shipyards at Bilbringi and sleeper units within Shimrra's own ships guarding the planet.

Coralskippers scrambled by the local base commander rose up in a dark cloud from the planet's surface, nearly five full squadrons worth. Then, unexpected to those still loyal to Shimrra, elements from each of the five squadrons broke off and began to fire on their comrades.
Since the prison camp was of such low value that it didn't even warrant a planetary yammosk, panic and confusion quickly broke out. The three Yuuzhan Vong picketships helping to protect the planet quickly moved into position, only to be engaged by the *Rebel Dream* and the Chiss House Phalanx under Major Hess'irolia'nuruodo.
The fight didn't last long, with all three picketships sent spiraling back into Selvaris within a matter of seconds. As sturdy as Yuuzhan Vong void defenses were, the inability of their crews to adapt to the well-timed torpedo releases by the assaulting Clawcrafts left them virtually defenseless. All it had taken was two volleys of torpedoes, interspersed with specially timed bursts of laser fire, and the warheads ripped through the hardened coral of Selvaris' primary defenders as if the voids hadn't even existed.
Even the coralskippers loyal to Shimrra lasted longer, if only by a few seconds. The X-wings of Twin Suns and Barefoot squadron, and the turncoat coralskippers, screamed into the atmosphere moments later and blasted apart anything that decided to fire at them. At the same time, Jaina used a modified villip to give the Yuuzhan Vong defenders a chance to surrender. After only two passes, the Yuuzhan Vong base had been subdued. Portions of the prison population were holding amphistaffs and razor-bug launchers on the guards, who were all kneeling in submission, while other prisoners cheered the fly-by of friendly fighters.
"Transport taskforce, Selvaris's defenders are down. Ef-Why-Vee-Aye estimates we have thirty minutes to load up everyone and get out of here." Jaina called out, using the acronym for Freed Yuuzhan Vong Intelligence. "Plenty of landing room in the main courtyard of the prison camp, sending coordinates now."
"Much obliged. Give us twenty and while have all those people back home." A convoy of transports dropped out of hyperspace and began a rapid descent towards the planet's surface.
"For being away from an X-wing for a couple of months, we didn't do so bad," Tahiri remarked over a private channel.
"Yup, the perfect milkrun for our new pilots," Jaina concurred. "One of my new guys even managed to wing a 'skip."
General Antilles had adopted Admiral Kre'fey's approach to working up the confidence of the new pilots, which was why two of the Galactic Alliance's premier squadrons were doing something as simple as a

prison-raid. Being premier squadrons, both Twin Suns and Barefoot had drawn the short straw and would be a part of Mon Cal's primary defenders when the Yuuzhan Vong eventually attacked. It was an unenviable but necessary position. Both squadrons were once again at full strength after the losses they had taken at Corellia and Ralltiir had been replaced, but the green pilots wouldn't have lasted long if immediately tossed into the all-out battles that everyone knew was soon to come.

"Transport taskforce to Rebel Dream, our holds are full of grateful soldiers, and Vong who have had a change of heart. We're disembarking the planet now."

"*This is the Rebel Dream, all fighters prepare to jump to hyperspace on my mark. See you at Bilbringi."*

In another minute, the Galactic Alliance taskforce leaped out of the system and left the now emptied prison camp back in the hands of its trusted guards.

}-II-{ }-II-{

"Part One of our plan can be considered a success," Grand Admiral Pellaeon said, to the pilots and officers in the briefing room of the orbital station at Bilbringi. "Freed Yuuzhan Vong Intelligence has reported that of the eighteen other locations on our list, taskforces at sixteen of them are reporting successful raids. Thanks to the efforts of yourselves and your fellow men and women of this alliance, we have rescued two hundred and fifty thousand prisoners and slaves, and captured several hundred of Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong." The experienced commander waited until the cheers and applauses died down. "We've also gained the valuable intel we were seeking. General Pash Cracken, one of those you just rescued as Selvaris, can tell you more."

The red-haired officer, his face slightly gaunt and sunburnt from the constant exposure to Selvaris' strong sun, still smiled amicably. "Thank you, Grand Admiral. Never thought I'd see the day when I'd be sharing a briefing with the Imperials."

"Look at it from my point of view," Pellaeon said dryly. "I actually let a taskforce to free Rebel prisoners use this base as a staging point and am now working in concert with General Antilles, the Empire's greatest enemy."

"The times certainly have turned this galaxy around." Pash turned on a holoprojector and began the briefing. "The base commander at Selvaris was a rather grumpy fellow named Malik Carr. Apparently after fouling up one-too-many times, he was stripped of his fleet and assigned babysitting duty. Unfortunately, the man took his life when he realized

that guarding a prison camp was *still* too much for him. Fortunately, during my stay there his subordinates were pretty much open with the information they shared, not realizing that some of us are pretty good at languages and were able to pick up some conversational Yuuzhan Vong. The planets currently on display, Cato Neimoidia, Chasima, and the like, are heavily fortified Shimrra bases where the anti-human virus used on Bastion and the Shaped version of Omega Blue are being developed in mass quantities and for others species. Those of you who greeted us when we left our cozy transports may have realized the lack of Duro, Mon Calamari, Quarren, and Bothan prisoners. This is because those prisoners were shipped off to said strongholds for experimentation. The Freed Yuuzhan Vong have already confirmed similar intel at the other prison sites, as well as the lack of diversity in the type of prisoners and slaves that were rescued. This is both bad and good. General Antilles."

"We know for a fact that Shimrra is becoming increasingly desperate," Wedge began, his tone serious. "We also know that he's looking for that crushing blow, the ultimate victory. Neither side can afford to drag the war out for another ten, or even five, years; which is what our analyst have said will take if we fight the Yuuzhan Vong system by system. Shimrra knows this as well, knows that any further war will devastate this galaxy so that no one will be able to live in it. This is why we are all agreed that he'll be attacking Dac in the near future."

"The Yuuzhan Vong are not aquatic people, so we have every reason to believe that they'll be aiming to wipe out all life on the planet. If they ever successfully develop a virus keyed to Mon Cal's underwater lifeforms, they'll no doubt use them to fill the oceans with dead. We already know they have no qualms about genocide if their backs are to the wall. For us to be successful in the end game, we have to neutralize these hard targets. Now here's the catch. We can't devote enough resources to launch simultaneous attacks on these bases without leaving ourselves drastically open to an equally crushing counter-attack. We also have to devote resources to safeguard Bothawui and the other possible species-specific targets such as Duro and Kashyyyk. Lastly, any offensive capabilities we do have are being re-appropriated by high command to attack planet-based yammosk battle coordinators to slow down and confuse the Yuuzhan Vong fleets ahead of the coming fight for Dac. What will happen instead is that our taskforce, and one out of Corellia, have been assigned to hit these bases one-by-one."

There were several groans and grimaces from the gathered crowd. Hitting the sites individually meant that the enemy would eventually

catch on to the type of installations being targeted and reinforce the latter locations.
"I won't lie. This is going to be tougher than many of you are used to," Wedge acknowledged. "Wraith Squadron has already lost two people at Chasima on a trial run of the Vong defenses, but the intel they gathered confirms that this isn't some wild bantha chase. The viruses and the sites are real. Fortunately, thanks to the Jedi, we have some equally tough friends ready to go and stick their necks out for us."
He gestured to a far door, and several squadrons of heavily armored soldiers entered and lined the back of the room. Tahiri, Jaina, and the other Jedi in the room all grinned as they sensed Sannah and Doran's presences within their suits of armor. "The leader of the Mandalorians wanted to return the favor for our help in defending Mandalore, and I wasn't going to refuse. While our fighters and cruisers distract the enemies in orbit, the Mandalorians and Jedi will be going in to take out the initial targets with a handy amount of explosives. Covering their retreat will be several stormtrooper units from the Five-oh-First."
"The running away while everything blows up behind us plan," Tahiri commented. "That sounds good to me."
Wedge smiled faintly at Tahiri's optimism. "The reason why we're choosing the Jedi, Mandalorians, and the Five-oh-First, is because they have the best chance of surviving should the Yuuzhan Vong decide to bathe the planet in the viruses located at the Shaping facility. These locations will be heavily defended—more so as we advance—and those on the ground will face an even greater risk. If anyone wants to request a transfer to one of the non-frontline units, Grand Admiral Pellaeon and myself will be in our offices for the rest of the day and you can come to either one of us in private. Grand Admiral."
Pellaeon stepped back up. "That's the gist of it, ladies and gentlemen. You'll be departing Bilbringi in two days, so get any outstanding affairs in order. Remember, if we want Mon Cal and Coruscant to be successful, *we* have to be successful here. If there is nothing else, you are all dismissed."
}-III-{ }-III-{
"Is this the table for all Force-sensitives and Jedi not marooned on a planet in enemy territory or stuck on the other side of the galaxy?"
"Yes, Kyp," Jaina rolled her eyes.
"Can I sit down?"
"Let me take a vote," Jaina said, glancing at the plastisteel table's other occupants. Tenel Ka, Uldir, Klin-Fa, Sannah, Doran, Bazel Warv, Yaqeel, Seff, Tekli, Lowbacca, and Tahiri all waved him over. Jaina sighed, as if inviting him was a huge trouble. "I guess you can join us."

"You should be honored, I'm a Jedi Master," Kyp said in mock offense.
Jaina cleared her throat and raised her hand. "Goddess, here."
"Goddess," Tahiri mimicked.
"Queen Mother of sixty-three star systems," Tenel Ka added good-naturedly.
Kyp blinked in bemusement, and then turned to the others. "Fine but at least they're just…"
"Rescuers of Jedi from places even Jedi get stuck in." Uldir and Klin-Fa finished smugly.
"Honorary Mandalorians who brought everyone units of Mandalorian supercommandoes," Sannah and Doran chimed in.
"We survived Myrkr and Hapes," Tekli added, as Lowbacca draped a playful arm around her to group himself with the much smaller Chadra-Fan. She then placed a small arm on Seff's shoulder. "And led fleets at Ralltiir and Corellia."
Bazel and Yaqeel glanced at each other, and then pointed to the others. "Smart enough to be friends with all of them."
Everyone laughed as Kyp shook his head in defeat and sat down.
"Right, forget I said anything."
"Don't worry, Master Durron," Bazel said sympathetically. "I'm sure a Jedi Master is just as important as the others…although I can't think of a reason why."
"I liked you all better when you were innocent apprentices free to mold to my will," Kyp mock glared at Jaina and the others. "Back in my day, being a Jedi Master actually meant something."
"You're thirty-six, *Master*," Jaina said, playfully shoving him. "Your generation wrote the book on what it was to be a Jedi, we're just adding a couple of chapters to it."
Kyp gave them all a genuine smile and raised his cup to them in salute. "Doing a pretty good job of doing it too. Even Barv and Yaqeel's group have more than proven themselves as Jedi these past few months."
"Thanks," Yaqeel and Bazel blushed.
"Really," Kyp said, leaning back in his chair and sighing. "Goddesses, royalty, and Jedi-extraordinaires aside, you and your friends are the Jedi Order's present and future. This is your era, and I'm just glad to be a part of it."
"Thanks, Master Durron," Jaina said softly.
"For?"
"For showing us why Jedi Masters are important too," Tekli said gently. "You're our guides, our teachers, the ones who show us how to fend for ourselves and make our dreams possible."

"It may be our time, but your generation built us up, suffered so we didn't have to," Tahiri agreed.
"[We're the New Jedi Order, all of us. The apprentices, knights, and masters,]" Lowbacca added. "[One generation teaches the next, helps them avoid the mistakes they made and grow stronger. Just like it has always been, but better.]"
"We're a family," Yaqeel spoke, leaning against Bazel.
"With some very weird relatives, and equally weird hobbies," Klin-Fa said with a ghost of a smile.
"And a penchant for getting into all sorts of trouble," Sannah said.
"And a habit for highly emotional speaches," Tenel Ka deadpanned.
"To those highly emotional speeches," Kyp raised his glass again.
"And to family," Jaina added, tilting her head in acknowledgement at Yaqeel.
Everyone raised their glass with smiles on their faces. "To family and highly emotional speeches."
}-IV-{ }-IV-{
"Father doesn't like the rain," Mallie said softly, as she, Natua, Ganner, Zekk, and her brother Rahm sat on a bombed-out stretch of road in the upper levels of Crullov City. The rain coming down was a few beats short of a storm, but was soaking the war-weary world of Corulag nonetheless. It was a relief in many ways as it washed away all the dried blood, oil, and debris that had gathered about the ill-kept planet. It was a testament to the sad state of affairs on the planet when the Jedi and other Corulag rebels felt safer in the heart of Crullov City, capital of all the criminal syndicates and organized crime, than in the actual capital Curamelle. "He says it reminds him of days he'd rather forget. But after fighting for this planet for nearly three years now, I think rain's a blessing."
"Let's hope it's a good sign then," Zekk said, letting the droplets of water splash across his upturned face. "With what we're planning, we're going to need all the luck we can get."
"It's definitely a genetic Jedi-thing then," Ganner said, glancing over to Zekk. "Our habit of forming suicidal plans and somehow surviving them?"
"I don't think it's genetic," Zekk shook his head after a moment's thought. "Want to blame it on Anakin? Maybe he passed some sort of be-a-hero virus onto us at Myrkr."
"The rest of the media's blaming everything else wrong about this war on him, why not," Ganner shrugged. "What do you think our fearless leader's going to do once this war is over? With the way the galaxy

currently sees him, he's likely to be tossed in prison for war crimes or something."
"It's strange," Zekk ruminated. "He was the poster boy for the Jedi Order, the one who gave us hope, showed us the Yuuzhan Vong could be defeated in their home territory. He rescued hundreds of thousands, saved lives, liberated Hutt Space, but in the end, he'll be an outcast. He's a hero, but he isn't. Someone who stands for the light side of the Force, but whom everyone else sees as dark."
"Meh, it's the media," Ganner waved a hand. "Before Hapes, he was our last best hope for a clear victory. On Hapes, Anakin was evil-incarnate. After Hapes he was the face of the Jedi Order and represented everything a Jedi should strive to be. And now he's the next Sith Lord ready to eat children and Ewoks at night and sacrifice baby bantha in some dark ritual during the day. I'm sure once Anakin does something unremarkable, the media will move to the next poor fool. I know! Maybe…"
"No," Natua said dryly, which was hard to do in the middle of the downpour they were sitting in.
"You didn't even hear my idea."
"I can guess," Rahm Marek said. "You're going to be the one to do something so wholly media-worthy that the guys with hover-cams will forget all about Anakin and focus on the living god that you are."
"And of course, the only reason you'll be doing this is to become the most famous Jedi ever, and not because you want to protect your friend from anymore criticism and scrutiny," Mallie added.
"You know its bad when people you've only known for a couple of months have you pegged," Zekk chuckled at Ganner's gob-smacked expression.
Ganner smiled sheepishly, and then ran a hand through his water-logged hair. "Alright, you got me. But it's the least I can do for that guy and his pint-sized girlfriend. Manipulating the media is easier than fighting the media."
"Of course, we have to survive this planet first," Zekk nodded.
"We're already focusing on another one of your crazy ideas, can we save the post-war insanity for another time?" Natua agreed.
"How was I supposed to know that my plan would work so well?"
"You're Ganner Rhysode," the four others promptly chimed in unison.
"Speaking of plans," Ganner saw several ill-armored men with highly illegal weapons strapped to their backs approach them. "It looks like the leaders of all those criminal syndicates are finally ready for us."

"They really didn't appreciate having the government confiscate all their slaves and profits, did they?" Rahm said, getting to his feet with the others.
"The only downside with our alliance to them is that I shudder to think where Corulag will be once they step into the power vacuum we're creating," Mallie said, sending a dubious look to Ganner and Natua, the brains behind their current plan.
"That's the interesting thing about these people," Ganner remarked. "They may be criminals, but they're organized criminals with family values. Unlike the lower street gangs and random thugs, these guys know about honor, about taking care of their own. Just because they started off on the opposite side of the law doesn't mean they'll stay there when things start falling apart all around them. Give them a common enemy, and they'll be your best friends."
"You've been spending most your life countering their actions, so it's understandable that you might have some doubts," Natua said as they began to walk towards the men that had come out to greet them. "But a healthy Corulag, one not controlled by the Yuuzhan Vong, is better for their business than the current state of this planet. Criminals need a government to flout, a society to be on the opposite side of. As Jedi Rhysode has shown me, anarchy and martial law can be organized crime's worst enemies. They'll want a return to the status quo, maybe with a few additional benefits, but a return just as much as we do. They currently have the muscle, the means and resources, and the intel that we need to free Corulag. And with Ganner's release of all slaves, we currently have their mindset against the puppet government in power."
"While your parents and the rest of the Corulag rebels continue to distract the puppet government with their hit-and-run attacks, we'll be working with the true power base on this planet and somehow gain access to the Vong ships in orbit," Zekk explained. "Hopefully, when the Galactic Alliance fleets finally do make it out here, we can roll out the welcome mat for them and add another liberated-a-planet-from-the-Vong to Ganner's résumé."
The group entered a luxurious, wood-lined den and were handed towels by several servants.
"They're all ready for you Jedi inside," a shifty-looking man said, gesturing to several elegant-looking wooden doors.
"Understood," Zekk said politely. "Both Mallie and Rahm Marek will be negotiating for us on our behalf. Is there anything they should know before we enter?"

"Only to treat the council with the utmost of respect," the man said. "You may be Jedi, but you're the ones asking for *our* help after all."
"Don't worry, they've got that covered," Ganner said, heartily slapping their backs supportively.
"What?" Both Marek children finally managed to blurt. "What do you mean? You're the guys who came up with the idea!"
"Well this is your planet, isn't it?" Zekk grinned.
"Foreign Jedi, last time we'll be giving you permission to land on *our* planet," Mallie grumbled in a manner that made her closely resemble her mother.
"Hey, the worst that can happen is that these crime families decide to turn us over to the Vong for the bounties on our heads and this planet falls apart even more," Ganner said. "No pressure."
Rahm glowered at the older Jedi. "Just so you know, negotiations have never been a strong point of our family. We're more of a cleave-our-way-through-armies-of-bad-guys type of people."
"Always a first time for everything," Natua, being between the ages of the two siblings, said deadpan.
"We *really* don't like you foreign Jedi," Mallie muttered. She rolled up the sleeves of her Jedi robes. "Fine, let's get this over with. The sooner we have this alliance, the sooner we can get our planet back."
}-V-{ }-V-{
"This is an outrage! The ultimate heresy!" The uproar from the gathered throngs of Shimrra's inner-circle filled the meeting chambers.
"The Intendant Caste must protest this, Dread One!" High Prefect Yoog Skell's voice joined the disgruntled chorus.
"Their creation goes against everything the cortexes have taught us!" A Master Shaper yelled.
"Have we not served you loyally, Supreme One? We are the Blessed of Yun-Yammka, have been your bodyguards and servants for generations!" The elite warriors of the Warrior Caste added in mournful wails.
"The gods cannot possibly have allowed these abominations to occur!" Priests cried out.
"They look like mere Shamed Ones!" The voice of Supreme Commander Chaan was heard last.
Finally, Shimrra stood from his polyp bed, and the chamber fell silent. Before him, in five rows of ten, were a group of muscular, dark-skinned males with skin as black as dried Yuuzhan Vong blood. They appeared more humanoid than Yuuzhan Vong, their small but muscular stature making Shimrra truly gigantic in height as he stood behind them like a benevolent, dark god.

The fifty individuals were nearly nude, save for traditional Yuuzhan Vong waist-straps. Burned into their breast on either side were markings denoting their belonging to the priest and warrior castes. Though each had an amphistaff wrapped around their wrists and a coufee tucked into their waist-strap, a third weapon was attached on the opposite side. There was no mistaking the yorik-coral growths and the lambents that pulsated within.

"You have all protested," Shimrra said, his voice eradiating with power. "Yet you have not considered what I have. Considered that the gods have begun to share with us the knowledge of the Eighth Cortex. Master Shaper Qelah Kwaad has been given access to such sacred knowledge. It was the gods who made my Slayers possible. A force to counter the blasphemy that are these *Jeedai* that none of you seem able to kill."

"Supreme One…"

"*I* am not done speaking, leader of the Blessed of Yun-Yammka, High Priest Shakliir," Shimrra said in a near silent rebuke. "The Blessed of Yun-Yammka have failed time and time again. On Hapes, at Ebaq Nine, and elsewhere. The Intendant Caste seems to fear that these Slayers will upend the order they so efficiently keep, but that is far from it. The Slayers will help to preserve that order, to secure it from the heresies that threaten to undo all that we have done. I have already deployed the Slayers to protect our most important assets. We will let the infidels crash upon our bases like waves against a cliff. We will stand strong, and they will yield, and they will die."

"We are to preserve our people's proud history by relying on these misshapen creatures who look like mere Shamed?" Supreme Commander Chaan voiced in distain.

"Supreme Commander," Shimrra gestured in his direction. "Pick ten, no, twenty of your best men. They and yourself will in turn face only one of my Slayers. If you are successful, you will have proven that the gods still favor the tactics we have been using. If you fail, you will have died knowing that the gods frown upon those who doubt their powers."

The ranks of Slayers took several steps back and parted to the sides, leaving a lone Slayer standing before the Supreme Overlord.

Supreme Commander Chaan sneered. He and his men were several heads taller than the figure they faced. Had all survived the war thus far and were well versed in combat. It seemed like a ridiculously simple challenge. *Maybe Shimrra truly has lost his mind*.

The twenty-one warriors surrounded the obviously Shaped creature, who showed no reaction to the overwhelming odds he faced.

With a nod from the Supreme Commander, five of his warriors moved in to skewer the figure. All five fell to the ground a second later with their heads removed from their bodies. The Slayer's genetically modified amphistaff had extended, lashing out and cracking through the air as it cleaved clean through the necks of the five warriors. The Slayer hadn't even moved a step.

Seven more attacked, and then the remaining eight. They were more careful now that they had seen this new amphistaff variant's abilities. But that did not help them. The Slayer danced around them, accepting amphistaff blows in exchange for fatal attacks of his own. No matter what the warriors did, the Slayer's wounds seemed to heal only seconds after a blow was made. A warrior's amphistaff lashed out and bit away a section of the Slayer's face. The wound bubbled, but didn't heal, giving the warriors heart.

The warriors closed in again.

One by one, the warriors began to fall.

It was a deceptively one-sided battle. After the eleventh body hit the ground, the Slayer appeared to become bored with the fight. A split second later, the lambent and yorik-coral lightsaber attached to his belt flew into his hand and activated. A deep purple blade lit up the room and worked in tandem with the Slayer's unique amphistaff.

In a dizzying blur of motion, over the next few seconds, the remaining ten Yuuzhan Vong—Supreme Commander Chaan included—dropped lifelessly to the floor.

The Slayer returned his weapons to their places, standing mutely in a field of corpses. The amphistaff wound on his face gleamed brightly, the tissue hardening and leaving a permanent furrow in the Slayer's cheek. The genetically modified soldier didn't even appear to be winded as he straightened and then bowed lowly to Shimrra.

Complete silence reigned.

"Are there any more objections?" Shimrra said, his voice lofty as he stared down his followers. "To defeat the enemy, we must think and fight like the enemy. But we will use our own abilities, our own knowledge to do so. My Slayers are the match to any *Jeedai*, are more than a match for the best our warrior caste can bring to bear. The gods have granted us the knowledge, and Master Shaper Qelah Kwaad has Shaped the finest weapons and ships for the Slayers. They will do what all of you so far have not been able to do—to kill the Solos, the Skywalkers, and all the other *Jeedai* that have plagued us from the start of this war."

The ranks of the Slayers formed up in front of Shimrra once more, and the Elite of the Yuuzhan Vong all bowed their heads in reverence.
"*Al'tanna Shimrra Knotte Yun'o!*"
}-VI-{ }-VI-{
As the last of the Yuuzhan Vong Elite filtered out of the chamber, a single figure emerged from the shadows and knelt low in front of Shimrra and Onimi.
"Nom Anor, Nom Anor," Shimrra shook his head pityingly. "Just what am I going to do with you?"
"Dread One, I live to serve only you," Nom Anor whispered, his knees quaking in fear from being so close to the Supreme Overlord. "I bring news of the planet known as Zonama Sekot and of the heretics."
"If you referring to your failed attempt to kill the leadership and destroy the planet, I am already aware," Shimmra said calmly. "My own agents have just confirmed that the traitorous leader of their movement, a Shamed named Taan, survived and is leading Zonama towards this planet as we speak."
"The planet survived?" Nom Anor's eyes bulged and he focused on the gnarled feet of the Supreme Overlord.
"Indeed," Shimrra nodded. "Though the reason why I have not killed you, is because your actions were not a complete failure. Those same agents reported that your attack took the lives of nearly twenty-five thousand heretics. That is something not even the Supreme Commanders who have been waging this war from the start have been unable to do."
"This humble servant thanks you for your mercy."
"Do not be so quick to thank me," Shimrra said, taking a step forward so that Nom Anor was nearly kissing his feet. "Your plan ultimately failed. Zonama Sekot still exists, is still a rallying cry for the heretic movement, an insult to the gods."
"Great One, command me and whatever you wish, I shall do it."
"Good," Shimrra said. "Then use all your contacts, gather all your resources, I shall task you with two assignments. I am sure someone of your intelligence and resourcefulness will be more than capable of accomplishing them."
"Tell me, Dread One. Anything."
Shimrra smiled coldly. "Your mission is to assassinate the *Jeedai* Jaina Solo and Tahiri Kwaad. You are to kill them and bring their bodies to me. You have until the attack on their capital to do so."
All color drained from Nom Anor's face as the former Executor froze in place. Nom Anor knew that the order was tantamount to a death sentence. He knew too much about Zonama Sekot, had failed one-too-

many times. Yet, this was the life he had chosen. Subservience to the only one strong enough to preserve the strength of the Yuuzhan Vong. But on the off-chance that he actually succeeded in his goal, he would be beyond reproach. Would truly be Shimrra's right hand once more. Slay gods to become a god. That seemed like an even exchange.
"What is wrong, Nom Anor? Where is the eagerness you were showing me only moments ago?" Shimrra whispered lethally.
"I am merely grateful that you entrusted such an important task to me, Dread One," Nom Anor recovered, working his suddenly dry mouth. "I swear to you that the bodies of the heretical *Jeedai* will be before you before Nas Choka launches his assault on the infidel capital."
"See that it is so."
"Might I be allowed to command some of your Slayers?" Nom Anor pressed. "Despite the fact that they are heretics, the two *Jeedai* are formidable warriors in their own right."
"No," Shimrra answered.
"No?" Nom Anor's face fell.
"The Slayers are mine alone to command. Those who serve under you —receive your commands and direction—Nom Anor, do not seem to last long. If you need the Slayers, tell me your plan and I will consider placing *you* under *their* command."
Nom Anor swallowed, knowing full well that nothing but a swift death would be accomplished if he argued the point. "Thank you then, Dread One. I shall come up with something to ensure that both *Jeedai* are slain and brought before you."
"Then go," Shimrra said. "Return with their bodies or not at all."
}-VII-{ }-VII-{
The death toll of the first waves of Freed Yuuzhan Vong was frightening. Though the outbreak of the modified Omega Blue virus had been brief, it had been lethally so. The dead outnumbered the living, and those left had the grim task of burying the ones taken by the virus. Added to the distress was the fact that Zonama Sekot was on a blind hyperspace jump, the virus having destroyed several key neural clusters that enabled Sekot to control the hyperdrive engines. The jump, though prepared for, had caused a whole range of meteorological and geological issues. Magnetic storms ravaged parts of the planet, while earthquakes shook the land and buckled tectonic plates. Yet, the Ferroans all said that this was a blessing compared to their previous quest for a system to call home.
The entire sky was a vivid blue as stars raced by at lightspeed, the planet itself a frightful dark. The many lifeforms on the planet were deathly quiet in timid fear, hiding in their dens or curled up in their

nests. Despite this, both the Ferroans and Yuuzhan Vong were hard at work trying to repair the damage inflicted upon the planet.
"Can you lower that kit for me?" Nen Yim called out, dangling off the side of a cliff-face with a team of shapers and Ferroan healers. They were trying to replace the damaged neural clusters with a modified set taken from one of their ships. The mix of Ferroan and Yuuzhan Vong biot was proving more than interesting as the two cultures put their minds together to come up with new and innovative ways to heal their home.
"The bubbly green one or the solid purple one?" Anakin called back down.
Nen Yim made a face. "The *marqba*...the bubbly green one!"
Anakin levitated the Zonama Sekot-supplied basket down to the Master Shaper. "Here."
"Thank you," Nen Yim plucked the basket out of the air and proceeded to smear the contents on a blackened organic mass attached to one of the alien hyperdrives.
"What does that stuff do again?" Anakin called out conversationally.
"It's my own concoction," Nen Yim explained as she worked. "It's a bio-electrical mat that allows our biots to better connect to the electrical currents created by your technology."
"Astral," Anakin whistled. "You tested it before?"
"On one of your interdictor generators that was captured by Shimrra's people," Nen Yim replied. "The solid purple kit please, you can take the green one back."
Anakin performed a small juggling act as he levitated one basket up and the other down. "Can I ask you a question?"
"You may." Nen Yim began to attach a nodular-like device to the gooey mat of material she had spread out.
"On Yavin Four, what made you follow Mezhan Kwaad instead of turning her over to the priests? She didn't seem like the type of person that earned the loyalty of others so easily."
Nen Yim was silent for a moment, and then answered almost clinically. "She was not always like she was, Mezhan. Your actions on Yavin Four simply revealed her true nature. That for all her abilities and skills, it was matters of the heart, the need to live a life outside of the restrictions placed on us all, that eventually drove her insane. She was not a good person, but she was daring, brave. She saw this galaxy and our society for what it truly was and strived to make her place anyway."
"She definitely wasn't like any of the other Shapers I've met," Anakin agreed.

Nen Yim emitted a small laugh as she finished up her job and pulled herself back to the top of the cliff. She sat on the edge next to Anakin and stared out at the gaping canyon before her. "I was but a mere adept, fearfully dabbling in heresies to make ends meet, when I was assigned to Mezhan. It was her who made me realize the dangers of heresy, of the possibilities it opened up. I guess, in a way, it was also her who made me realize that the gods were only just figments of our imagination. A hope that everything our people have lived and died for was worth something in the end. Now I have a question, if I may?"
"Go ahead," Anakin unwrapped the small bundles of food he had brought with him and began to pass it out to the team of shapers and Ferroans as they ascended the canyon wall.
"Why do you spend so much effort to save my people?" Nen Yim said softly, staring up at the eerie blue glow that filled the sky. "And don't say it is because of your *Jeedai* values or because it is the right thing to do. The right thing to do would have been to neuter us completely, pack us away somewhere so that we wouldn't be a threat to anyone else or to ourselves. And only an insane person would spend time aiding someone who has killed trillions of people. I know the *Jeedai* are not *that* merciful."
"Then I guess I'm a little insane," Anakin answered, unwrapping a leafy sandwich the Ferroans had supplied him. "Your people aren't all bad, though. You're stubborn, sneaky, and have an overall sense of identity that's lasted your millennia of traveling."
"That identity has no redeemable quality what so ever," Nen Yim retorted.
"That identity is what kept your people alive, is what enabled them to survive. And just look around you," Anakin gestured to the teams of Ferroan and Yuuzhan Vong working on the cliff side. "Soon your people will have that home you've all wished for. Will finally be able to settle down and stop warring, wandering the stars. Sure you may have killed trillions, razed planets, destroyed moons, but your people are also helping to heal this galaxy. Never before has the galaxy been so united, actually in a position to advance out of our own cycles of war and destruction. If given the chance, I think our galaxy and the people of yours can make this galaxy a much better place than what it was."
"You are naively optimistic," the Master Shaper drawled. There was a break in their conversation as several of the younger shapers came up to her for advice on how to integrate Ferroan and Yuuzhan Vong tech. After a brief explanation, the young shapers bowed and returned back to their task. Anakin didn't miss the nostalgic expression on Nen Yim's face as she followed the younger shapers' retreat.

"And what would that make you?" Anakin tilted his head in the direction of the shapers.
Nen Yim folded her hands in her lap as she looked down. "A fool who dreams the impossible. Who dreams of a better Yuuzhan Vong, of a life uncomplicated by anything but knowledge alone. To see Yuuzhan Vong children living in a society based on the truth instead of lies. Where the gods actually mean something, rather than serve the whims of a madman. I just want…I just want my people to be whole and well, and countless other things that probably won't ever come true. And I know it is unwise and unhealthy to live on wishes and dreams, but at the moment, it is all I have."
"You'll have that dream, Nen Yim. I promise. We're already a step closer, and when this war is over, Tahiri and myself, and all the others will definitely do our best to help you make that dream a reality."
"Like I said," Nen Yim whispered, a tired smile on her face. "A naïve optimist."
"If there is one thing this war has taught me," Anakin said, returning her wan expression. "Is that as long as there is hope, as long as you have friends and family standing at your side, anything is possible."
"There is some truth in your words," Nen Yim admitted, closing her eyes. "Being with Ne'rai Rin and the other shapers…I am not used to having allies, much less friends. Ahsi was the only one I trusted in, confided with about my heresies. But with these other shapers, I truly feel like the future I dream of is in my grasp. That we can Shape a perfect world for the Yuuzhan Vong and help our society transcend as a people. That was not a feeling I had serving under Shimrra and it is… disconcerting, to say the least."
"Disconcerting?"
"There is one downside to having hope, Anakin Solo," Nen Yim said softly. "The pain of having one's hope crushed. Long ago I had resigned myself to death, to seeing my dreams go unfulfilled. And I made my peace with that. I would do what I could, knowing that I would never be more than just another mindless pawn in the politics and war that have destroyed our people. And then Tahiri and the others entered my life and I allowed myself a sliver of hope, the off-chance that my dream might actually be possible. Yet, Nom Anor's actions were only a reminder of just how fragile the hopes of our people are, how quickly that new life we were looking forward to could be taken away. I am heartened by your promise to help, but do not promise more than you can deliver. We are a warlike race and many would rather destroy themselves than embrace the change needed for our people to live. I have only begun to dare to hope again, but…I do so fearfully,

reluctantly. You and your friends may want the Yuuzhan Vong to have a future free of war, but it is ultimately up to the Yuuzhan Vong to decide their own future."

}-VIII-{ }-VIII-{

"Still worried about Anakin, Farmboy?" Mara asked. Both she and Luke were on one of the Sekotian airships surveying the disruptive effects hyperspace travel was having on the planet.

The icecaps had melted during the travel and inundated the coastal regions with massive tidal waves. Mountain ranges had emerged and collapsed in a matter of minutes, and great fissures had broken out across the planet's vast continents. Sekot was doing all it could to minimize the damage, but the planet was being ravaged all the same. It was an ironic sort of violence—natural forces of destruction caused by unnatural means, on a planet that shouldn't have existed using, hyperdrives it was never meant to have. It was nature but it wasn't. It was the Force acting on a scale neither of the Skywalkers could even hope to comprehend.

"A little," Luke admitted with a sigh.

"You're still having those dreams, aren't you? 'A darkness within, a darkness without'."

"The details may be a little different but the overall message is the same," Luke said tiredly, his face prematurely aged from the pressures and burdens he faced. Though he no longer had to worry about leading the Jedi Order as he once had, his concerns had shifted to his family. On some level, he knew that he needed to trust his youngest nephew to make the right decisions. Yet the visions unnerved him greatly, both in their message, but also in their repetition. It was like a warning bell, ringing ever louder, harkening a future none would come to enjoy. And like the irony of Zonama Sekot's current upheaval, just trying to see the future, predict what would happen to change it for the better, was an impossible task. Or at least, a task for someone far more powerful than he.

At one point in time it had simply been assumed that Anakin would take a leadership role in the New Jedi Order. That Anakin would lead alongside his siblings and bring about a new golden era for the Jedi Order. He had been in line to do so as well.

Luke focused on the distant valley where the hyperdrives were being repaired. Anakin had everything he could possibly need to be that leader, had the charisma, the intelligence, the kind heart, and the foresight. His friends rallied around him, his enemies got out of the way or were swept aside. Yes, Anakin was the type of person that could change an entire galaxy.

Yet, as recent events had shown, maybe that bright future was just one of many possibilities, one that would never come to pass. Anakin was vilified in the media, hated by a small vocal minority within the Jedi Order, and distrusted by others. For all the good he had done, that aura of darkness, the shadow that Luke saw in his visions, still remained. And the most frustrating thing was that Luke had no idea what to do, how to fix it or keep his ominous vision from coming true.
"We're going to have to trust him, you know," Mara said, joining Luke's scrutiny of the distant valley. "Once the war is over, he and Tahiri are staying here, and you know how the Yuuzhan Vong view the two of them. Besides, I know Tahiri. She's a heck of an apprentice. There's no way Anakin's going to fall to the dark side or be consumed by whatever Sithspawn entity that's in your visions so long as she's around."
"Is it smart though?" Luke murmured. "Leaving them both on a planet so strong in the Force? Not only strong, but willing to admit that it is still exploring the Force and its own beliefs. We'll be leaving them with the most warlike race this galaxy has ever seen, allowing them to continue following a view of the Force that is decidedly risky and dangerous. Just looking out at all the destruction going on below us, I can't help but shudder. The potential for disaster, for a rise far darker than Palpatine…"
"Luke, you can't change the future, or stop whatever it is from coming. Even Yoda and Palpatine weren't able to do see their own ends, see the change the galaxy went through at their downfall," Mara leaned her head against his shoulder. "The only thing we can do is face it like we always have, together, as a family. You, me, Ben, Leia, Han, Jaina, Jacen, Anakin, everyone. *If* that darkness comes, and that's a big 'if' Farmboy, we'll confront it and beat it back to whatever corner of the galaxy it came from. As long as we have each other, there's nothing to worry about."
Luke smiled wanly. "You're right, of course."
"Of course," Mara rubbed his arm.
"Anakin," Luke sighed aloud, shaking his head almost ruefully. "How he can get me so concerned while guaranteed to be isolated at some far corner of the galaxy is beyond me."
"Look on the bright side," Mara laughed, wrapping her arms around Luke. "At least Jaina and Jacen don't give us any ulcer-causing worries. Maybe Anakin decided to be considerate and take their share."
"They've all definitely grown," Luke bent down and gave Mara a brief kiss. "I'm so fortunate to have you all."
"Everything will work out for the better, Farmboy," Mara breathed, pressing her forehead against his. "You'll see. And in several years

time, maybe even decades from now—when we're both old and wrinkled—we'll look back on this moment and laugh at those pesky visions of yours. I can see myself now, telling *our* grandchildren about the time their grandfather nearly drove himself crazy trying to stop the future from happening."
"I thought I already was crazy," Luke muttered with a sly smile.
"The good kind of crazy," Mara nodded, kissing him again. "You can do without the insane Force-mystic variety."
Luke ran a hand through his hair sheepishly and nodded in agreement. "Agreed. That's what I have you around for."
"You finished trying to change the future and ready to fix the present?" Mara gestured to the turbulent landscape below them.
Luke exhaled one last time, calling on the Force to center himself. "Yeah."
"Good, I was beginning to feel old with all the younger Jedi running around patching up this galaxy."
"Jaina, Jacen, Anakin," Luke turned away from the viewing platform. "At least we know the galaxy is in good hands with them. Besides, I think we've earned ourselves a break, don't you think?"
"Break yes, after we end the galactic war and stop a madman from killing off billions of his own people."
"Haven't we done that for the past couple of decades?"
Mara grinned and tugged on his hand as they walked back towards the front of the airship. "Yup, it never gets old."
Luke couldn't help but feel his spirits lifted and his concerns melt away as he focused on the ever-youthful energy his wife gave off. Once again he thanked the Force for his family and for the fact that they had all survived the war thus far. Mara was right, whatever would happen in the future, they could face it so long as they were together.
}-IX-{ }-IX-{
Jacen knew that at one point in his life he had been less serious, less grim. Life to him had once been a fun adventure with his friends, where everyone but the bad guys got a happy end. He was far from a joking mood though.
Had been for a fairly long time.
And now, as he helped Yuuzhan Vong children bury their parents, their crèchemates, that old Jacen who would have had a playful quip or reassuring smile died a little bit more. He couldn't afford to be the free-spirited jovial boy that he had once been only six years ago. Not when everyone he loved, everything he valued, was being put to the test.
Standard Jedi teachings said that one should remain calm, not give into their emotions. Yet how could one possibly distance themselves from

baser impulses when you were helping children bury their family after a massacre such as the one Nom Anor had unleashed? Revenge, anger, hatred, emotions Jedi had been trained to ignore, emotions that were detrimental to the 'light side' of the Force, were so easy to embrace. The Freed Yuuzhan Vong needed justice, needed peace. They truly needed to be free. But that wasn't going to happen if people like Nom Anor and Shimrra still lived.

Once again, Jacen found himself questioning the existence of the dark side of the Force. Only two years ago, he would have dismissed such doubts as nonsense. He had been against the Jedi going to war, against the use of aggression to answer aggression regardless of however many people died. But the times had changed. *He* had changed. Anakin's arguments, Vergere's teachings, reshaping his beliefs and opening himself up to other possibilities.

Dangerous possibilities.

He knew he had to tread carefully. Far greater Jedi than he had fallen while trying to walk that very narrow path. But the war and its constant reminder of death and destruction *had* changed his views. Did the dark side exist?

It wasn't really dark to want a few people dead so millions could live in peace, was it? It wasn't dark to want to kill Nom Anor and Shimrra so the four-year war would finally come to an end. It couldn't possibly be. To slay them, that was his duty as a Jedi. With them dead, he would have protected many. It was an unfair tradeoff: sacrifice a few lives for the rest of the galaxy or stick to the standard Jedi pacifistic tendencies and let the war wage on. Stick to his nonaggression beliefs and let more Nom Anor atrocities occur, let the galaxy drag his brother's name through the mud.

Jacen let out a breath, connecting himself to the living planet beneath his feet. Sekot wasn't angry, just curious and sad. It was like a child trying to understand just why someone would massacre their own people, people who only wanted to live a life in peace. The planet was seeking to understand, to find some reason in Nom Anor's actions, and Jacen wished it the best of luck.

He briefly wondered if *he* would ever be cable of what Nom Anor had done. If there was ever a time when the galaxy actually needed an evil deed to bring it back together. Just reflecting on the Yuuzhan Vong invasion itself, a violent action instigated by a few, and it was clear just how much better the galaxy would be because of it. Without the Yuuzhan Vong, without the many razed planets and trillions of deaths, the galaxy would still be fractured.

But if fleets of ships and countless dead were necessary to truly make the galaxy a safe place for his friends and family, would he have the will to plunge the galaxy into another war? Was evil for the sake of good what the galaxy truly needed? The Jedi, for all their efforts and struggles, rarely seemed to make a dent in the endless crime and sufferings that plagued the galaxy. In fact, the only time the galaxy changed on any significant level was when the Sith rose to power. One need only look at the countless histories—how governments under the Jedi Order eventually stagnated and gave way to a Sith Order that accomplished more in months what a Jedi Order struggled to do for millennia—to see that conflict was needed for change to occur.
As devastating as Nom Anor's attack had been, the survivors were all the stronger for it, all the more engrained in their beliefs. As shattered as the galaxy had become through the war, it was more united than ever.
There was no dark side, only the Force.
Jacen was slowly beginning to believe that. Slowly seeing the logic in what Vergere was teaching him. What many saw as the dark side was simply nature in action, the motions of a galaxy balancing itself out. Chaos led to order, which led to chaos once more. The more order tried to resist, try to deny its inner nature, the stronger the chaos became. Jacen was so close to believing it, so close to seeing the Force as one whole. Logically it made sense, but he still had his doubts. It was like being on the brink of a breakthrough, knowing what needed to happen and just needing that final push to get there.
"Pensive once more?"
"Vergere," Jacen nodded, as the Fosh solemnly took a seat next to him.
"It is strange," Vergere tilted her head as she watched the grieving Yuuzhan Vong. "Isn't it? How similar the Yuuzhan Vong are to us. Both these 'freed' Yuuzhan Vong and those who serve under Shimrra have their own dreams, their own desires. Are driven by the same greed and animalistic instincts that drive any other race in this galaxy. And yet, very few people can see beyond the superficial."
"A predator killing to feed its family," Jacen whispered softly, his mind flickering back to the scene in the Kaleesh temple. "To the animal, it's survival, a meeting of its needs. To an onlooker, it might be a wonton act of violence, something they can't understand because all their food comes prepared in little containers."
"You surprise me."
"You did say I should look at things from different perspectives," Jacen said offhandedly. "And it's definitely cleared up a lot of the questions I've had."

"A lot, but not all?"
Jacen silently watched the Yuuzhan Vong finish the mourning ceremonies and retreat back into the temporary shelters they had created. Finally, he responded. "Nom Anor, Shimrra, Onimi. I have to meet them to be certain. I need to see the galaxy as they see it, why they still fight when survival can be guaranteed. Why they still resist when the Freed Yuuzhan Vong have guaranteed themselves a spot in this galaxy, a new home. There will always be question, and until I face Shimrra and his followers, I will have more than I am comfortable with. I have to face them, see them through the Force and understand their intentions here," Jacen reached up and touched his head with a single hand. "And here." He lowered his hand to touch his chest. "Somehow the Force is telling me that this is something I can't mess up. That… that I'm so close to actually understanding the lessons you have been giving me. "
Vergere tilted her head. "There is no rush, Jacen Solo. It took me many years to come to my own conclusions, and even then, the other Jedi saw me as sort of an odd bird."
"You *are* an odd bird," Jacen said wryly.
"True," Vergere made the Fosh equivalent of a smile. "But more odd than usual. You see, those who see the Force as I do, see the Force as your brother does, are more likely to be distrusted and ostracized. It takes a certain kind of strength to continue believing as you do when everyone has turned their backs to you. You've already seen it with your brother. Anakin Solo may well have been this war's hero, the one who set into motion events that ushered in its end. Yet history will not remember him as such. Instead he will be remembered as just another fallen Knight, someone the war consumed and spat back out, corrupted morals and all. It is said that the victors are the ones that write the history, and though no one wins, that is how your brother will be recalled."
"I know," Jacen said grimly. "And if I could change that, I would. Anakin deserves more than that."
"On the other hand," Vergere said with a sly look in her eyes. "Being cast out, exiled, can be far more beneficial than you might think. Once exiled, you no longer have to behave within the norms of society. Their laws, their codes of conduct, they become meaningless. Being cast out allows one to explore themselves and their beliefs, to seek a better understanding of the galaxy as a whole. Anakin Solo may have fallen far from grace, but that does not mean he won't benefit from it."
"Oh?"

"Yes, rather than be consumed by your media, your government, and all the politics that come with being a hero, he will be a little no one out on the fringes of the galaxy. The only burdens he will carry are ones he places on his shoulders, not ones foisted onto him by others. He will be on a sentient planet strong in the Force, yet will not have to worry about following what is proper for a Jedi. Like you, Jacen Solo, your brother can only grow stronger."
Jacen nodded noncommittally. "I would hope so. But even then, his potential is wasted on a single planet. Both Jaina and I know that he was meant for something more."
"Uniting the Jedi Order and turning the tide of the war is not enough?" Vergere clucked in amusement. "If he cannot be the hero the galaxy needs, the one they turn to, I can think of no better person for the job than you, Jacen Solo. Do not fret about your progress, you are growing quickly. Understanding *will* come to you, it just takes time."
"Yeah," Jacen ran a hand through his hair. "Once this war is over, I should have plenty of that on hand."
"Indeed. Now shall we go inside? The blond scientist girl, Danni Quee, had bid me to fetch you for the evening meal."
Jacen's stomach grumbled on cue, and the young man nodded. "Right, food first, contemplating about the Force and the future later."
Vergere chortled as they both rose. "One step at a time, my young apprentice. One step at a time indeed."
}-Chapter Break-{
A\N: Next chapter coming right up!